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A SHORT LIFE OF
SRI RAMAKRISHNA



ADVAITA ASHRAMA
MAYAVATI, ALMORA, HIMALAYAS

Published by
SWAMI PAVITRANANDA
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MAYAVATI, ALMORA, HIMALAYAS

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First Edition—1940

Printed in India
BY K. C. BANERJEE AT THE MODERN ART PRESS
1/2, DURGA PITURI LANE, CALCUTTA

PREFACE

This is in response to a great demand for a shorter biography of Sri Ramakrishna whose message is spreading far and wide with ever-increasing rapidity. The matter is taken mostly from *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, published by us, though other available books have been consulted and the plan is quite different. A few sayings of Sri Ramakrishna have been given towards the end of the book, so that a complete picture of the Master can be had, as far as possible, within a small compass. We hope this short volume will arouse in many readers an interest for studying the life of Sri Ramakrishna in detail.

PUBLISHER

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February 13, 1940

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A SHORT LIFE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

I

INTRODUCTORY

The history of a nation is not made in a day. It is the result of centuries of silent working of manifold creative forces. It is in this way that the distinctive culture of a nation is formed. The history of India proves that a nation which stands loyal to its cultural traditions can never die.

Religion is the backbone of Indian national life. From the hoary past India has passed through numberless vicissitudes. That she has survived them is due to the fact that the nation has remained true to its spiritual instinct. At every time of spiritual crisis in Indian national life there has been born a saint or a prophet who has saved the nation from the impending danger. Sri Krishna, Buddha, Shankara, Nanak, Chaitanya —each fulfilled a great demand of the age in which he was born.

The nineteenth century saw India faced with a great crisis. With the British conquest of India came the invasion of Western civilisation upon the country. Awed by the material power of the conquering nation, Indians hailed everything Western as a thing to be welcomed. In the meanwhile Christianity—one of the greatest proselytising religions of the world—began to work silently for a thorough cultural conquest of the land.

At this psychological moment appeared Sri Ramakrishna, the embodiment of the spirit of India's culture and religion. He opened the eyes of the Indians to the beauty, grandeur and strength of Hinduism at a time when their faith in them greatly slackened. His life stood as a bulwark against those alien forces which attempted to undermine the spirit of Indian civilisation.

Sri Ramakrishna was born not only to save Hinduism from a dire calamity, but also, as it were, to resuscitate all faiths. As a result of his having practised other religions besides his own and directly experiencing all to be true, any man belonging to any religion will find his faith in his own system strengthened. As such Sri Ramakrishna's life is sure to stem the tide of the general unbelief of religion all the world

over. Already the influence of his spiritual realisations has travelled abroad. Who will doubt but that it will gather strength as years roll on. For Sri Ramakrishna represented not only Hinduism but all faiths.

II

PARENTAGE

Towards the middle of the eighteenth century there lived in the village of Dereypore in the District of Hooghly, Bengal, a Brahmin family of which Manik Ram Chattopadhyaya was the head. He was a pious and kind-hearted man. With fifty acres of land at his disposal he was able to meet the needs of his family as also to lend a helping hand to the poor and distressed of the village in times of calamity. In about 1775 he was blessed with a son, who was named Khudiram. Two other sons and a daughter were also subsequently born to him. After the death of Manik Ram, the entire charge of the family devolved on his eldest son, Khudiram, who, trained in the family traditions of an orthodox house, was eminently fitted to attend to the manifold religious and secular duties of the household. Both Khudiram and his wife, Srimati Chandramani, were exceptionally devoted to their tutelary deity Sri Ramachandra, and soon earned the love, respect, and admiration of the villagers for their charity, truthfulness, and kindness.

In 1814 an incident of great importance occurred in the life of Khudiram. He was call-

ed upon by the local zemindar to give false evidence in support of a case which he had brought against one of his tenants. But so fearless was Khudiram's integrity that he was prepared to stake his all rather than deviate an inch from the path of truth and rectitude. His stout refusal to comply with the request of the landlord entailed on him in its turn a heavy persecution which ultimately led him to leave his ancestral house for good. Penniless and homeless, Khudiram bade adieu to Dereypore and made his new home in a neighbouring village named Kamarpukur, where, through the benevolence of one of his friends, he got half an acre of very fertile land, which supplied the simple needs of the family.

The village of Kamarpukur is situated in the western extremity of the District of Hooghly on the road leading to the holy place of Puri or Jagannath. The village was highly prosperous and noted for its manifold arts and crafts. The flourishing condition of the place is even now testified to by the debris of its old buildings and the ruins of great walls and temples as also by the existence of some large tanks. Khudiram began his life anew in the midst of the quiet and peaceful surroundings of this village, and soon attracted the notice and

gained the respect of his neighbours. One day, while returning from a neighbouring village, Khudiram strangely came into possession of the emblem of his tutelary deity Raghuvir in a paddy field. He took it home and began to worship it as his own Ishta. Both Khudiram and Chandra made a profound impression upon the villagers by their exemplary life and unswerving spirit of devotion to their beloved deity as also by their overflowing kindness to all who came to their door for help and succour. Thus though the home of Khudiram never smiled in affluence, it was a source of great solace to many an aching heart.

After six years' residence in Kamarpukur, Khudiram married his son and daughter. Ramkumar, which was the name of the son, in the meanwhile had become quite proficient in Hindu lore, and was able to relieve, to a certain extent, his father's family burden by earning something. So Khudiram had now more time at his disposal to devote himself to religious practices. In the year 1824 he went on foot on a pilgrimage to Rameshwari in South India, which lasted about a year. Twelve months later, in 1826, his wife Chandra gave birth to her second son, who was named Rameshwari. About eleven years later, in 1835, Khudiram

went on another pilgrimage—this time to Gaya. Here, after the performance of the sacred rites, he had a strange vision at night. He dreamt that he was in the temple of Vishnu, where his forefathers were feasting on the sacred offerings he had made. Suddenly a flood of celestial light filled the holy precincts of the shrine, and the spirits of the departed fell on their knees to pay homage to a Divine Presence seated on a throne. The effulgent One beckoned to Khudiram, who, coming near, prostrated himself before Him and heard the luminous Person saying, "I am well pleased at your sincere devotion. I shall be born in your cottage and accept you as my father." Khudiram awoke with his heart thrilled with joy. He understood that a Divine Being would bless his house very soon.

About the same time Chandra Devi was also having strange visions at Kamarpukur. One night she dreamt that a luminous person exactly like her husband was lying by her side. Another day, while standing with Dhani (a village blacksmith woman) before the Shiva temple adjacent to her house, Chandra saw a thick column of divine effulgence dart from the image of Lord Shiva and enter her. Chandra was overpowered and fell unconscious on the

ground. Dhani nursed her back to consciousness, but from that time Chandra began to feel as if she were quick with child. On Khudiram's return to Kamarpukur, Chandra narrated this event to her husband with her characteristic candour and simplicity. But Khudiram, who had already had the strange vision at Gaya, was now completely convinced that they were soon to be blessed with a divine child. He advised her not to speak of her visions to any one. Chandra was greatly consoled, and passed her days in complete resignation to the will of Raghuvir.

III

BIRTH AND BOYHOOD

The blessed hour for which Khudiram and Chandra were anxiously waiting at last drew near. In the early hours of the morning of February 18, 1836, Chandra gave birth to a boy whom the world was to know afterwards by the name of Sri Ramakrishna. Celebrated astrologers predicted a great future for the child, and Khudiram was overjoyed that the prospective greatness of his son confirmed his previous vision and the experience of Chandra. He named him Gadadhar in memory of his wonderful dream at Gaya.

Since his very birth Gadadhar cast a spell of fascination not only over his parents and relatives but also over his neighbours, who could not help paying visits to Khudiram's house whenever possible just to have a look at 'Gadai'—as he was lovingly called.

The years rolled on, and Gadadhar was now five years old. He began to show wonderful intelligence and memory even at this early age. The precocious boy learnt by heart the names of his ancestors, the hymns to various gods and goddesses, and tales from the great national epics. As he grew to be very restless, Khudi-

ram sent him to the village school. At school Gadadhar made fair progress but he showed great distaste for mathematics. He directed all his attention to the study of the lives and characters of spiritual heroes. Constant study of those subjects often made him forgetful of the world and threw him into deep meditation. As he grew older, he began to have trances whenever his religious feelings were roused. Soon it was found that not only religious subjects but beautiful scenery or some touching incident was also sufficient to make him lose himself. Once an occurrence of this kind caused great anxiety to his parents and relatives. Sri Ramakrishna in later years narrated this incident to his devotees in the following way:

“In that part of the country (that is, Kamar-pukur) the boys are given puffed rice for luncheon. This they carry in small wicker baskets, or, if they are too poor, in a corner of their cloth. Then they go out for play on the roads or in the fields. One day, in June or July, when I was six or seven years old, I was walking along a narrow path separating paddy fields, eating some of the puffed rice which I was carrying in a basket. Looking up at the sky I saw a beautiful sombre thunder-cloud. As it spread rapidly enveloping the whole sky,

a flock of snow-white cranes flew overhead in front of it. It presented such a beautiful contrast that my mind wandered to far-off regions. Lost to outward sense, I fell down, and the puffed rice was scattered in all directions. Some people found me in that plight and carried me home in their arms. That was the first time I completely lost consciousness in ecstasy." But this was not the only time he had such an experience. On two other occasions also in his boyhood—once while accompanying a group of elderly ladies of the village who were going for worship in a temple in a neighbouring village, and again, while playing in the village dramatic performance on a Shivaratri night the rôle of Shiva—the boy Gadadhar passed into deep trance, and it was with great difficulty that he could be brought back to the plane of normal consciousness.

In the year 1843 Khudiram died, and the entire burden of the family fell upon the shoulders of Ramkumar, his eldest son. The death of Khudiram brought a great change in the mind of Gadadhar, who now began to feel poignantly the loss of his affectionate father as also the transitoriness of earthly life. He, though very young, began to frequent the neighbouring mango-grove or the cremation

ground in the vicinity and pass long hours there absorbed in thought. But he did not forget his duty to his loving mother. He became less exacting in his importunities and tried every means to lessen the burden of his mother's grief and to infuse into her melancholy life whatever joy and consolation he could.

Gadadhar soon found a new source of pleasure in the company of wandering monks who used to stay for a day or two in the rest-house built by the neighbouring Laha family for wayfarers. One day Chandra was startled to find her dear boy appear before her with his whole body smeared with ashes and with pieces of cloth put on like a Sadhu. Association with these itinerant monks and listening to their readings from the scriptures inclined the naturally emotional mind of the boy more and more to meditation and kindled in him the latent spirit of dispassion for all worldly concerns.

Gadadhar was now nine, and it was time to invest him with the holy thread. A curious incident happened in this connection. It is the traditional custom in a Brahmin family that just after the investiture the newly initiated should accept his first alms from some relative or at least from a Brahmin of the same social

standing. But Dhani, the blacksmith woman who had tended the child in the lying-in-room, had long ago prayed to Gadadhar to allow her the privilege of giving him the first Bhiksha (alms), and the boy, moved by her genuine love, had agreed. After the investiture ceremony was over, Gadadhar, in spite of the repeated objections of other members of the house, kept his promise and accepted his first alms from this Shudra woman in contravention of the time-honoured custom of his Brahmin family. But the event, however trifling, is not without significance. This unyielding love of truth and rising above social convention at this tender age reflected in no small measure Gadadhar's latent spiritual potentiality and foresight, and disclosed the real stuff the boy was made of. It showed that true love and devotion were more to him than social restrictions.

Gadadhar's inborn qualities of head and heart became manifest on more than one occasion at this time. Shortly after the thread ceremony an incident occurred bringing him for the first time before the villagers as a teacher. He was then only ten years old. One day he was listening with rapt attention to an animated discussion held by certain scholars on

some subtle point in the house of the local zemindar. The boy, understanding their difficulty in arriving at the proper solution, made a suggestion to one of the Pandits and asked whether such might not be the answer. The solution of Gadadhar was so appropriate and pertinent to the point under discussion that the scholars were amazed at such mental maturity in one so young.

But from now on the boy's aversion for school increased. He, in the company of other boys of the school, often played truant and passed a great portion of the day in various sports. Gadadhar trained a number of young boys in the histrionic art and held performances in the neighbouring mango orchard. Gadadhar's favourite themes were the various incidents in the life of Sri Krishna. The boy, with his fair complexion and flowing hair, a garland about his neck and a flute to his lips, would often take the part of Sri Krishna. Overwhelmed with the emotion associated with these themes, he would fall into frequent trances. At times the whole mango grove would ring with the loud Sankirtans which the boys sang in chorus. Thus, deeply absorbed in these divine sports, Gadadhar lost all taste for school education and engaged himself more and more in the

study of the epics, Puranas, and other sacred books, which gave him ample spiritual stimulus. But this other-worldly attitude of the boy caused a great deal of anxiety to his elder brothers.

Soon another misfortune overtook the family. The wife of Ramkumar died, leaving an infant son behind to be taken care of by the aged grandmother. At this time Ramkumar's income also unexpectedly diminished, and being forced into debt, he went to Calcutta and opened a Tol (school for Sanskrit study) at Jhamapukur in the central part of the city to earn some money to meet the financial needs of the family. The management of the house naturally fell on Rameshwar. But, as before, Gadadhar was unmindful of his school studies. He spent a great portion of his time in worshipping Raghuvir or in reading passages from the holy books and in helping his aged mother in her domestic duties. As days rolled on, his aversion to academic education became more pronounced. And soon the idea dawned on him that he was destined to fulfil some great mission in life, though he did not know what. The realisation of God was to him the only purpose worthy of consideration. Much as he would have liked to have taken up the begging bowl and renounced every-

thing for the Lord's sake, the thought of the plight of his unprovided mother and brothers made him forgo his desire. In the struggle between the two ideas he was powerless to decide, and could do nothing but resign himself to the guidance of Raghuvir, fully believing that He would show him the way out of this distressing situation.

Meanwhile Ramkumar began to experience great difficulty in managing all his duties in Calcutta alone. On one of his visits to Kamar-pukur he noticed Gadadhar's peculiar indifference towards school, and when he learned that Gadadhar had given up his studies and was roaming in the village with his friends and playmates, he decided to take him to Calcutta, where he might supervise Gadadhar's studies and have his help in his manifold works. Gadadhar readily agreed to this proposal, and on an auspicious day set out for Calcutta with the blessings of Raghuvir and his mother.

When Gadadhar came to Calcutta, he was entrusted with the duties of priest, which he was glad to discharge. Here too by his simplicity, integrity of character, and winning manners he soon formed a circle of friends and admirers, all belonging to respectable families. But when, after some months, Gadadhar still

showed no interest in his studies, Ramkumar naturally got annoyed, and one day took the boy aside and admonished him for his apathy towards education and his general indifference. "Brother, what shall I do with a mere bread-winning education?"—was the spirited reply of the boy. "I would rather acquire that wisdom which will illumine my heart and getting which one is satisfied for ever." Ramkumar could hardly realise the full import of this laconic answer as he was quite ignorant of the phenomenal mental transformation of this wonderful boy, who, more than ever, now realised that he was born for purposes different from those of the ordinary run of men. So Ramkumar was puzzled to hear this straight and pointed reply from his youngest brother. All his arguments to prevail upon the boy to pursue his studies with zeal and enthusiasm proved fruitless. He had therefore no other alternative but to leave everything to the will of Raghuvir, until a new event, with far-reaching consequences in the life of young Gadadhar, came from a most unexpected quarter.

IV

IN THE TEMPLE OF DAKSHINESWAR

At that time there was living in Calcutta a rich widow of great piety named Rani Rasmani. In 1847 she spent a fortune to found a temple to the great goddess Kali on the bank of the Ganges at Dakshineswar, which is four miles to the north of Calcutta. In the midst of a rectangular paved courtyard stood the vast temple of Kali, the sovereign Deity, and another dedicated to Krishna and Radha. Both were reached by an open terrace above the Ganges between a double row of twelve small temples to Shiva. In addition to the temples there were a spacious music hall, rooms for the temple-staff, two "concert-rooms," and quarters for the Rani's family. There was, besides, a beautiful garden with two tanks and a large banyan tree which played a great part in Sri Ramakrishna's life.

The date for the installation of the statue of the goddess Kali was fixed for May 31, 1855. The Rani was eager to spend any amount to make this function a splendid success; but, unfortunately, the Rani being a Shudra by caste, no orthodox Brahmin could be procured to officiate as her priest or partake of the sacra-

mental food in her temple; for, according to the orthodox custom of the time, it was derogatory to a Brahmin to worship for a Shudra or to accept gifts from him. The Rani made frantic efforts to collect the opinions of renowned Pandits in her favour on this matter, but none of the answers were acceptable except what came from the Tol of Jhamapukur. Ramkumar informed the Rani that if she made a gift of the Kali Temple to a Brahmin, endowing it with adequate funds for maintenance, it would be quite in keeping with the injunctions of the scriptures, and no Brahmin would be considered degraded by acting as a priest or partaking of the food offered there. The solution came to the Rani as a godsend in the hours of her greatest mental agony and despair, and she eventually succeeded in getting Ramkumar himself as the priest in the temple of the goddess Kali. The temple was consecrated with unique pomp to the unbounded joy and relief of the pious-hearted Rani. After a few days, Gadar-dhar also began to live with his brother in the sacred temple-garden of Dakshineswar, in the calm and congenial atmosphere of which he felt quite at home and found greater opportunities to pursue his spiritual practices.

It was at this time that Hriday, a young man destined to be a close companion of Sri Ramakrishna for twenty-five years and a faithful attendant during the stormy days of his Sadhana, appeared on the scene. He was the nephew of Gadadhar. His presence at Dakshineswar delighted Gadadhar's heart beyond measure as he found in him a trustworthy associate to whom he could open his heart in moments of trouble and difficulty.

Soon the eyes of Mathuranath Biswas, the son-in-law of Rani Rasmani, fell on young Gadadhar, whom he persuaded to take charge of decorating the image of Kali with flowers, leaves and sandal paste in the morning, and costly jewellery and clothes in the evening. Thus entrusted with work quite suitable to his temperament, Gadadhar gave himself heart and soul to the task, and in leisure hours entertained the goddess with devotional songs which kept everybody enthralled and spellbound.

Shortly after his appointment in the Kali temple, an incident occurred which enhanced the worth of Sri Ramakrishna* in the eyes of Rani Rasmani and Mathur. One day the priest

* Henceforth we shall call Gadadhar by this more familiar name. No definite information as to its origin is available. Most probably it was given by Mathur Babu.

of the Radhakrishna temple, while taking the image of Krishna to the retiring room, suddenly slipped, and one leg of the image was broken. This gave rise to a great commotion in the temple, and the priest was summarily dismissed from service for his carelessness. The Pandits, who were called to advise the Rani as to what should be done under the circumstances, unanimously came to the decision that the image should be thrown into the Ganges and a new one installed in its place as it was contrary to the scriptures to worship the Lord in a broken image. This decision did not appeal to the pious Rani, who, at the suggestion of Mathur, sought the opinion of Sri Ramakrishna on the matter. After hearing the whole story, he exclaimed in an exalted mood: "Their solution is ridiculous. If a son-in-law of the Rani fractured his leg, would she discard him and put another in his stead? Would she not rather arrange for his treatment? Why not do the same thing here? Let the image be repaired and worshipped as before." The Pandits were puzzled to learn the ruling of the young priest. It did not satisfy the scholars at first, but they finally had to accept it. The joy of the Rani knew no bounds. Sri Ramakrishna, who was an adept in modelling, undertook to repair the limb

at the request of the Rani and did it so adroitly that even careful scrutiny did not reveal where the break had been. Sri Ramakrishna was now made the priest of the Radhakrishna temple, and Hriday was appointed to assist Ramkumar in dressing and decorating the image of Kali.

V

THE DIVINE MOTHER

Sri Ramakrishna adapted himself to his new station and forgot everything else. Ramkumar, being troubled by Sri Ramakrishna's love for solitude and growing indifference to the world, resolved to teach him the elaborate procedure of the worship of Kali, so that, later, he might assume the task quite efficiently. As it is not considered advisable to undertake the worship of Shakti, or Kali, without being properly initiated, Sri Ramakrishna, at the advice of his elder brother, got the necessary initiation from a Brahmin in Calcutta named Kenaram Bhattacharya who was noted for his devotion and experience. It is said that as soon as the sacred Mantra was uttered in his ears, Sri Ramakrishna, overwhelmed with religious fervour, gave a shout and plunged into deep concentration, which greatly astonished the Guru.

From this time forward Ramkumar asked his brother now and then to take over the worship of the Divine Mother, while he himself worshipped at the altar of Radha-Govinda instead. Ramkumar was now aged and decided to go home for a change. Sri Ramakrishna was therefore permanently put in charge of the wor-

ship of Kali. But Ramkumar was not destined to see his home again for he breathed his last at a place a few miles north of Calcutta. His death came to the young priest as a great shock and a revelation. It occurred at a time when he was fast realising the transitoriness of the world, and all his energies were now given to the search for something that was real and imperishable. While those about him were wasting time in all sorts of frivolity, he was burning day and night with a consuming thirst for God.

To Sri Ramakrishna the image of Kali was not inert stone but the Mother Herself. The Goddess wears a gorgeous Benares Sâri (cloth) and is decorated with precious ornaments from head to foot. From Her neck hangs a garland of skulls and round Her waist a girdle of human arms—made of gold. In Her lower left hand She holds a decapitated human head, also made of gold, and in the upper one a sword. With Her lower right hand She offers boons to Her devotees; with the upper one is symbolised, “Fear nothing.” The skulls and the sword represent Her terrible aspect, and Her right hands—offering boons and symbolising fearlessness—the benignant aspect. She is both terrible and sweet—like Nature alternately destroying and creating. This is the Deity whom Sri

Ramakrishna worshipped, the Preserver as well as the Destroyer. But to him She was ever the affectionate Mother—the Repository of all blessedness and power—sweet, tender, and full of motherly solicitude, the Mother who with loving care protects Her devotees from harm. To Her he offered a whole-souled devotion, regarding Her as the only true guide in darkness and confusion.

From now on he began to shun the company of the worldly people. At night, when everybody was asleep, he would arise and repair into the adjoining dense jungle, returning after day-break, with eyes swollen as though with much weeping, or showing the effects of prolonged meditation. The realisation of God became the one absorbing passion of the young aspirant. He would shed profuse tears like a child at being denied the vision of the Mother and would burst out crying: “O Mother! Where art Thou? Reveal Thyself to me. Ramprasad saw Thee and obtained Thy divine grace. Am I a wretch that Thou dost not come to me? Pleasure, wealth, friends, enjoyments—I do not want any of these. I only desire to see Thee, Mother.” When the peal of evening bells in the temple announced the close of the day, he would grow disconsolate and cry in the agony of his heart:

“Another day is spent in vain, Mother, for I have not seen Thee! Another day of this short life has passed, and I have not realised the Truth !”

Owing to this intensity of religious fervour he could no longer conduct the worship regularly. He would sit before the image like a statue. While meditating in the course of worship, he would put a flower on his head and sit silent for a couple of hours, or while offering the food he would gaze at the Mother as if She were actually partaking of it. He was ridiculed at first for such strange acts, but his steady devotion ended by commanding respect and admiration, though some still regarded him as unbalanced. Mathur was charmed to see the God-intoxication of the young priest and his ecstatic absorption in the divine service. Sri Ramakrishna was perfectly indifferent to what people thought, and directed all his energies to the realisation of the goal he had set for himself. At last, when he was at the limit of physical endurance, the veil was lifted, and he was blessed with the vision of the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna described his first experience to his disciples afterwards as follows:

“I was then suffering from excruciating pain because I had not been blessed with a vision of

the Mother. I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered by a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realise Her in this life. I could not bear the separation any longer: life did not seem worth living. Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. Determined to put an end to my life, I jumped up like a madman and seized it, when suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What exactly happened after that, or how that day or the next passed, I do not know, but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother."

Since then, his constant prayer was to have a repetition of this divine vision. He would cry so bitterly that people gathered about him to watch. "I scarcely realised their presence," the Master afterwards said, "they looked more like shadows or painted pictures than real objects, and I did not feel the least abashed at displaying my feelings before them. But the moment I lost outward consciousness in a paroxysm of pain at separation from the Mother, I would find Her standing before me in Her matchless radiant form, granting boons to Her

devotees and bidding them be of good cheer ! I used to see Her smiling, talking, consoling, or teaching me in various ways.”

From this time onward his attitude towards the Mother changed. He became like a child, confident that his inability to see Her whenever he wished was because She, in a playful mood, was purposely hiding Herself. His self-surrender was now complete. “O Mother,” he would pray day and night, “I have taken refuge in Thee; teach me what to do or say. Thy will is paramount everywhere and is for the benefit of Thy children. Merge my ego in Thy will and make me Thy instrument.” As his realisation deepened, the vision of the Mother became luminous. Formerly he regarded the stone image of Kali as possessed of consciousness; now the image disappeared, and in its stead there stood the Living Mother Herself, smiling and blessing him. “I actually felt Her breath on my hand,” the Master used to say later. “At night when the room was lighted, I never saw Her divine form cast any shadow on the walls, even though I looked closely. From my own room I could hear Her going to the upper storey of the temple with the delight of a girl, Her anklets jingling. To see if I were not mistaken, I would follow and find Her

standing with flowing hair on the balcony of the first floor, looking either at Calcutta or out over the Ganges.”

Hriday was able to give many interesting details of those days. He used to say: “Whenever one entered the temple, a thrill would be felt, specially when my uncle was worshipping, as though there were a living Presence there. I could never resist the temptation of watching him. His strange manner of worship filled me with wonder and reverence; at the same time I often questioned his sanity, for his actions were contrary to the injunctions of the Shastras. I was much afraid of what Rani Rasmani and Mathur Babu would do if the news of his conduct reached them.” Of Sri Ramakrishna’s method of worship, he would say: “I would notice that my uncle, taking flowers and Bael leaves in his hand, touched his own head, chest, in fact, the whole body, including the feet, with them and then offered them at the feet of Kali. At other times, with eyes and chest flushed, like a drunkard he would move with tottering steps from his seat to the throne of the goddess, touch her chin as a sign of endearment, and begin to sing, or talk, joke, laugh, or even dance, taking the image by the hand !! Sometimes he would approach the throne with a morsel of food in

his hand and putting it to Her lips entreat Her to eat. . . . Again, at the time of worship he would become so deeply absorbed in meditation that there would be no sign of external consciousness. Every morning, as he picked the flowers for the Divine Mother's garlands, I would see him speaking to somebody, or laughing, or indulging in merriment! He never closed his eyes during the night; whenever I awoke I found him in an exalted mood, talking to some one, singing, or sitting in deep meditation where the Panchavati* is now."

* It means a cluster of the five sacred trees, namely, Ashwattha, Bael, Amalaka, Ashoka, and Vata, or Banyan. Such a place is considered very holy and helpful to meditation.

VI

GOD-INTOXICATION

All these but confirmed the belief of the local authorities that Sri Ramakrishna must be mad. So they sent a detailed report about these things to Mathur at Calcutta. Soon after this Mathur paid a surprise visit to the temple, and was struck with wonder at what he saw. It did not take Mathur long to decide that Sri Ramakrishna's method of worship was the outcome of a genuine and profound love for the Divine Mother, the like of which is seldom encountered. Convinced that the object of building and maintaining the temple had been attained, he returned to his home and sent an order the next day to the Temple Superintendent that the young priest was to have complete freedom to worship in any way he chose, and that he was not to be interfered with.

Rani Rasmani was greatly attracted to Sri Ramakrishna, for she felt that his strange behaviour bespoke the fulness of devotion rather than any mental derangement. One day she came to Dakshineswar and after bathing in the Ganges entered the temple to worship and meditate. She later requested Sri Ramakrishna to sing some songs to the Mother. Slowly the

music arose from the heart of the devotee; like a fountain of heavenly bliss it bathed his whole being with ecstasy. After a time, noticing that the Rani was inattentive and was thinking of some important lawsuit, he gave her a sharp rebuke. At this the Rani's heart was filled with remorse that worldly thoughts could so influence her mind as to turn it away from the divine bliss which the young priest was lavishly showering on her. Rasmani retired to her room. When her attendants complained of Sri Ramakrishna's insolence towards her, she answered, "You do not understand it; the Divine Mother Herself punished me and thus illumined my heart."

This incident, however, led Mathur to suspect that there might be some nervous trouble in Sri Ramakrishna. So he arranged for his treatment by an expert physician, Kaviraj Ganga Prasad Sen, of Calcutta. The treatment, though continued for some time, brought no relief. Mathur tried to persuade Sri Ramakrishna to keep his feelings within bounds and to regulate his life in accordance with fixed standards. As Mathur came in closer touch with Sri Ramakrishna and saw more of the Master, he inwardly began to look up to him as a Guru. The relation between the two soon grew to be

one of mutual trust and confidence. Sri Ramakrishna would candidly tell of his extraordinary visions to Mathur and also ask his opinion. Mathur, finding in him a happy combination of prophetic wisdom with the innocence of a child, concluded that Sri Ramakrishna's body was to be his special care, just as in the subtle spiritual domain he himself was protected and guided by the Master. Mathur counted it a rare privilege to be of the least service to the Master, and served him for fourteen years with uncommon zeal and devotion.

Sri Ramakrishna had a catholic spirit from the very beginning. He made no distinction between one form of God and another. The realisation of one aspect of the Reality inspired him to take up another and to follow it with unflinching devotion till that aspect of Truth revealed itself. He now felt a strong urge to realise Rama, who is regarded as an incarnation of the Lord Himself. He therefore took upon himself the task of reproducing as faithfully as possible the attitude of Hanuman towards Rama—that of the faithful servant towards the master.

At the end of this Sadhana he had a wonderful vision, so exceedingly vivid and so different from any of his previous ones that it remained

long in his memory. One day while he was seated in the Panchavati, a luminous female figure of exquisite grace slowly advanced from the north towards him, looking graciously on him all the while. The idea soon flashed within him that she must be Sita whose whole life had been centred in Rama. She suddenly entered into Sri Ramakrishna's body with the significant remark that the smile on her lips She bequeathed unto him. This was the first vision Sri Ramakrishna had with eyes wide open, without meditating on anything. Ultimately this Sadhana was crowned with the realisation of Rama as an incarnation of God.

About this time one evening Sri Ramakrishna felt an irritating sensation in his palate, which after a minute began to bleed. He described the incident as follows: "The colour of the blood was dark like the juice of bean leaves. It was so thick that only a little portion fell to the ground and the rest clotted and hung like a rope from my teeth....I was sorely perplexed. Fortunately, at that time there was staying in the Kali temple a Sadhu who, hearing of the incident, came and examined the colour of the blood and the place from which it came. He said: 'Thank God ! There is no cause for anxiety. This haemorrhage has done you great

good. I see you were practising Yoga. This opened your Sushumna canal and a quantity of blood was rushing to the head. It is excellent that this blood, instead of reaching the brain, made a passage through the palate; or you would have entered the Jada Samadhi (the highest form of concentration mentioned in the Yoga-Shastra) from which you could never again have come down to the plane of ordinary consciousness. It must be that the Divine Mother has some great mission to be done through you, and She has saved your body.' I was reassured by his words and was at peace."

One day Haladhari (Sri Ramakrishna's cousin who acted as priest of the Kali temple for some time) cast aspersions on the truth of Sri Ramakrishna's God-visions and said, on the authority of the scriptures, that God is beyond the reach of the human mind. That gave rise to grave doubts in the mind of Sri Ramakrishna. He thus described his feelings and the subsequent experience to one of his disciples, Swami Premananda : "....With sobs I prayed to the Mother, 'How couldst Thou have the heart to deceive me like that because I was a fool?' A stream of tears flowed from my eyes. Shortly after I saw something like a volume of mist rising from the floor and filling the space before me. In the

midst of it appeared a fair face, calm and highly expressive, with a flowing beard. Fixing its steady gaze upon me the figure solemnly said, ‘Well, remain on the threshold of relative consciousness !’ Repeating this thrice the face gently disappeared in the mist, which also dissolved. This vision reassured me.”

Stories travelled to the people at Kamar-pukur that Sri Ramakrishna had gone completely mad. Naturally these news made Chandra as well as Rameshwar extremely anxious. Chandra repeatedly wrote to Dakshineswar asking her God-intoxicated son to come to Kamar-pukur, where under her maternal care and in the salubrious climate of the country his strained nerves might be soothed and his health regained. Sri Ramakrishna obeyed the call and found himself once again in the midst of the calm and peaceful surroundings of his native village. But even here, notwithstanding all the tender care of the affectionate mother and other relations, Sri Ramakrishna was at times overwhelmed with the same feelings as those of the Dakshineswar days when he was struggling to obtain a vision of the Divine Mother. There were two cremation grounds at Kamar-pukur. Sri Ramakrishna intended to practise stern Tapasya and choosing

one of those places for this purpose began to spend the whole day and a great part of every night there in worship and meditation. However, a few months' stay at Kamarpukur did him much good, and he soon recovered his normal state of mind to the great relief and joy of his aged mother.

Sri Ramakrishna was now twenty-three years of age, and he was as indifferent as ever to all worldly concerns. His mother and brother wanted to get him married so as to interest him in domestic affairs, and began to search for a suitable bride. The search was vigorously made but with no definite result. Sri Ramakrishna, finding his mother and brother in a dejected state, said to them in a semi-conscious mood: "It is useless to try here and there. Go to Jayrambati (a village three miles to the northwest of Kamarpukur) and there you will find the bride providentially reserved for me in the house of Ram Chandra Mukhopadhyaya." His prophetic word proved true to the letter. A girl was found there who was, however, only five years old. But Chandra Devi agreed to accept the girl as no other bride was available, and the happy nuptial ceremony was performed without delay. After his marriage Sri Ramakrishna stayed at Kamarpukur for about a year

and a half, as Chandra Devi would not allow him to leave her until he was completely cured. Then taking leave of his mother and brother Sri Ramakrishna returned to Dakshineswar.

On his return to Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna resumed his office, but after a few days he was seized anew with the madness of God-realisation. Mathur placed him again under the treatment of Kaviraj Ganga Prasad Sen, but with no results. Another famous physician was called in, whose diagnosis proved to be correct. He declared that it was a case of divine madness—the after-effect of some Yogic practices, which no medicine could cure.

Referring to this period of his life Sri Ramakrishna often said afterwards: "No sooner was one state transcended than another took its place. Before that whirlwind, the sacred thread was blown away. Not only that, even the wearing cloth hardly remained....The idea of caste lost all meaning for me. A low-caste man sent me a curry cooked by his wife which I ate with relish. In the Panchavati I would sit in deep meditation with my body perfectly still—losing all consciousness of the outside world. At that time, for want of proper care, my hair was matted. Birds would perch on my head and peck the grains of rice left there

during the time of worship. Often snakes would crawl over my motionless body, and neither I nor the snake knew it. Oh, what visions flitted past my eyes, day and night! As I sat down to meditate, I would find a Sannyasin emerging from my body with a trident in hand and directing me to concentrate my mind on God, leaving aside all other thoughts. He threatened to plunge his weapon into my body if I did not do so....The ordinary man could not bear a fraction of the tremendous fervour: his body would be shattered by a quarter of that emotion. I could forget my indescribable pangs only by seeing the Mother in some form or other for the greater part of the day and night. Otherwise this body could not have survived. For six years these eyes remained wide open, not a wink of sleep visited them. I could not close the eyelids however much I might try to do so. I had no idea of time nor of the body. When the mind, at rare intervals, came down to a lower plane and I had a faint idea of the body, a shudder of pain would pass through me at the thought that I was going mad. Standing before a mirror I would put my finger into my eyes to see if the eyelids would close, but they would not. Horrified, I would often burst into tears and pray, 'Mother, is this the result of

praying and wholly surrendering myself unto Thee? Ah! Thou hast visited me with a fell disease!' But the next moment I would say, 'Let it be as Thou wishest. Let this body go to pieces, but leave me not. Reveal Thyself to me, be kind to Thy helpless son. O Mother, I have taken shelter at Thy lotus feet. Thou art my only refuge.' As I prayed thus, my mind would again be stimulated, this body would seem a trifle, not worth thinking about, and the blissful Mother would appear before me and console me with Her gracious words."

One of his Sadhanas of this interesting period consisted in banishing from his mind all attachment for wealth and the pride of superior birth. Sitting on the bank of the Ganges, he took some earth in one hand and a few rupees in the other, weighing their value mentally as he passed them from hand to hand. Money, he said to himself, can at best give only a comfortable living and some facilities for charity—that is all. It cannot give realisation of God, which is the only thing worth having in life. Hence it has no more real value than this handful of earth. Firmly impressing this idea on his mind, he finally consigned both to the Ganges. Gradually this spirit of renunciation became the very breath of his life. He could not even bear

the touch of any coin. Any idea of material possession produced a terrible pain in his mind and body. When, on the death of Rani Rasmani, Mathur became the sole executor of her vast estate, he one day proposed to Sri Ramakrishna that he would set apart a large estate in his name. At this the Master thundered, "What! Do you intend to make me a worldly man?" Mathur was dumb-founded and did not dare to raise such a topic before him during the rest of his life. One day a rich Marwari gentleman, Lakshmi Narayan by name, noticed a soiled carpet on the Master's bed at Dakshineswar and at once offered to deposit in the bank in his name a sum of ten thousand rupees, so that his needs might be supplied. The proposal was so painful to Sri Ramakrishna that he besought him with folded hands never to mention the subject again. The Marwari still insisted. Finding argument of no avail, the Master cried out in anguish, "O Mother, why dost Thou bring such people here, who want to estrange me from Thee?" At this pathetic appeal the Marwari desisted. Referring to these incidents the Master afterwards remarked, "At the offers of Mathur and Lakshmi Narayan, I felt as if somebody were sawing my skull." Again, for the complete effacement of a sense of

superiority from his mind, he would wash unclean places like an ordinary sweeper, viewing alike all objects of the world as but modifications of matter.

VII

BHAIRAVI BRAHMANI AND A VAISHNAVA SAINT

One morning (in 1861) Sri Ramakrishna was plucking flowers in the garden of Dakshineswar when he saw a country-boat coming towards the smaller bathing ghat of the temple. A middle-aged, beautiful Sannyasini with long dishevelled hair stepped out of the boat. Though nearly forty years of age, she looked much younger. Sri Ramakrishna calling Hriday asked him to bring her from the Chadni (the roofed court which is the main entrance to the temple compound) to his presence. As soon as the Sannyasini, or Bhairavi, met Sri Ramakrishna, she burst into tears of joy and surprise and said in a tender voice, "My son, you are here! I have been searching for you so long, and now I have found you."

"How could you know about me, Mother?" asked Sri Ramakrishna. She replied, "Through the grace of the Divine Mother I had come to know that I was to meet three of you. Two I have already met in East Bengal, and to-day I have found you." She spoke with emotion, as though she had found her long-lost treasure at last. Sri Ramakrishna too was visibly moved.

After a while she told all about herself. She was born of a Brahmin family in the District of Jessore (Bengal), and was well versed in Vaishnava and Tantrika literature. She was a Vaishnava devotee of a high order. Her intense spiritual practices had bestowed on her wonderful realisations, which prompted her to find out a suitable aspirant to whom she could deliver all her attainments for his spiritual illumination. Sri Ramakrishna, like a boy, sat close by her and opened his heart to this Bhairavi, Yogeshwari by name, and related to her every incident of his Sadhana. He further said that people looked upon him as insane because his actions differed so widely from those of the common run of men. Full of motherly tenderness, she consoled him again and again: "Who calls you mad, my son? This is not insanity. Your state is what is called Maha-bhava* in the Shastras. Sri Radha experienced this state and so did Sri Gauranga. All these are recorded in the Bhakti Texts. I shall show you from books that whoever has sincerely yearned for God has experienced this state, and every one doing so must pass through it." These words reassured Sri Ramakrishna.

* An extraordinary state of religious ecstasy mentioned in books of Bhakti.

The relation of mother and son which sprang up between them from their very first meeting deepened as they became better acquainted. After some time the Brahmani fixed her abode at Ariadaha, a couple of miles north of the Dakshineswar temple. From there she used to come almost daily and instruct her God-intoxicated spiritual child. Every day she saw him go into a trance as they talked on spiritual matters, and she observed a strange analogy between the life of Sri Chaitanya and that of Sri Ramakrishna. Another incident happening at this time confirmed her belief that the Lord was incarnated again in the person of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna had been suffering for a long time from a burning sensation all over his body. Though experts and laymen all ascribed this malady to some internal disorder, the Brahmani found quite a different cause for it. She diagnosed it as the effect of his strong yearning for God. On scriptural authority, she prescribed a curious remedy. The patient had only to wear a garland of fragrant flowers and paint his body with sandal-paste. Great was the astonishment when under this treatment Sri Ramakrishna completely recovered in three days.

The Brahmani was now prepared to meet any scholar to prove her contention that Sri Ramakrishna was an Incarnation of God. Mathur, partly to satisfy his own curiosity and settle his own doubts and partly to humour Sri Ramakrishna, called a meeting of the distinguished scholars of the time. Vaishnava Charan, who was one of the leaders of the Vaishnava society and reputed for his knowledge of various philosophies and devotional scriptures, and Gauri Kanta Tarkabhushan of Indesh in the District of Bankura, who was a far-famed scholar and a great Sadhaka of the Tantrika school, also came to Dakshineswar on invitation. The result of the meeting was that Vaishnava Charan subscribed heartily to all the conclusions of the Brahmani. And Gauri also felt in his heart of hearts that Sri Ramakrishna was no ordinary saint. He gravely replied, "I am firmly convinced that you are that mine of infinite Spiritual Power, only a small fraction of which appears in the world from time to time in the form of Incarnations." Thus the two great scholars and Sadhakas who came to test Sri Ramakrishna ended by surrendering themselves at his feet.

It has already been stated that the Brahmani from the very first bore a motherly affection

towards Sri Ramakrishna. But she never forgot the divine mandate she had received to deliver her message to him, and she did her best to act as a spiritual guide to Sri Ramakrishna. He also undertook the course of Tantrika Sadhana under her guidance with the zeal characteristic of him. Referring to this period the Master would afterwards say: "The Brahmani would go during the day to places far from Dakshineswar and collect the various rare things mentioned in the Tantrika scriptures. At nightfall she would ask me to come to one of the meditation seats. I would go, and after performing the worship of the Mother Kali I would begin to meditate according to her directions. As soon as I would begin to tell my beads, I would be always overwhelmed with divine fervour and fall into a deep trance. I cannot relate all the varieties of wonderful visions I used to have. They followed one another in quick succession, and the effects of those practices I could feel most tangibly. The Brahmani put me through all the exercises mentioned in the sixty-four principal Tantra books. Most of these were extremely difficult Sadhanas—some of them so dangerous that they often cause the devotee to lose his footing and sink into moral turpitude. But the infinite

grace of the Mother carried me through them unscathed."

The many fiery ordeals through which he passed during this period enabled him to become firmly established on the highest level of spirituality. The Brahmani declared that her divine disciple had attained perfection in this system of Yoga and had passed through its extreme tests successfully—a thing which very few Sadhakas indeed could do. The most remarkable feature about Sri Ramakrishna's Tantrika Sadhana was that he attained perfection in every course in an incredibly short time—three days being sufficient. Not only was Sri Ramakrishna's perfection in this Sadhana unique and unprecedented, but it is also to him that the restoration of the purity of the ancient Tantrika practices at the present age was due.

The Kali temple of Dakshineswar was a favourite resort of devotees and Sadhus because of its seclusion and holy association, as well as of Rani Rasmani's liberality. They would stop there for a few days on their way to Gangasagar or to Puri. That was before the opening of the railways. At special times, Sadhus of a particular class would congregate in large numbers. The meeting of these different classes of monks

and devotees with Sri Ramakrishna was of great significance. The ideas of practical spirituality which originated with the prophet of Dakshineswar were disseminated through these Sadhus to their own disciples and followers. Even those fortunate persons whom he accepted as teachers were enabled to realise subtle truths which had hitherto been to them more or less matters of theory or intellectual speculation. Among the many devotees and scholars who came in contact with him at different periods, some took initiation from him, others were benefited in different ways by his influence, as we have seen in the cases of Vaishnava Charan and Gauri Pandit. About this time other great distinguished savants also, such as Pandit Narayan Shastri of Rajputana, Pandit Padmalochan Tarkalankar, the court Pandit of the Maharaja of Burdwan, and the like, were greatly attracted towards Sri Ramakrishna, and received spiritual inspiration from the Master.

It was probably about the year 1864 that one great Vaishnava devotee, Jatadhari by name, came to Dakshineswar. He was a wandering monk and a devotee of Rama. The Master often said that Jatadhari's love and yearning for God was peerless. Ramlala, or the "Child Rama," was his favourite Deity.

By long meditation and worship Jatadhari had made great spiritual progress, and had been blessed with a wonderful vision of Rama—the effulgent form of young Rama then became a living presence to him. “The Babaji,” said the Master later to a group of disciples, “was the lifelong devotee of Ramlala, whose image he carried wherever he went. He actually found that Ramlala took the food offered to him. Jatadhari was engaged day and night in the service of the image and was in a state of constant bliss. I could see the actions of Ramlala ; so I used to spend the whole day with the Babaji to watch him. Days passed in this way, and Ramlala became more and more intimate with me and followed me to my room. I saw Ramlala as vividly as I see you all—now dancing gracefully before me, now springing on my back, or insisting on being taken up in my arms. Sometimes, I would hold him on my lap. He would not remain there, but would run to the fields in the sun, pluck flowers from thorny bushes, or jump into the Ganges. When chastised, he would fix his beautiful eyes on me and smile, or like a naughty boy he would go on with his pranks, or pout his lips or make faces at me. Sometimes I lost patience and slapped him. With tearful eyes and trembling

lips he would look at me. Oh, what pain I would feel then for having punished him ! I would take him in my lap and console him. All these things actually happened.

“One day Jatadhari came to me weeping and said, ‘Ramlala out of his infinite grace has fulfilled my desire. He has revealed himself to me in the form I prefer, but he has told me that he will not go leaving you behind. I shall gladly leave him with you and go my way. It gladdens my heart to think that he is happy in your company.’ With these words Jatadhari left Ramlala with me and bade adieu to Dakshineswar. Ever since Ramlala has been here.”

VIII

ONE WITH THE ABSOLUTE

Sri Ramakrishna had by now practised all the different phases of devotion laid down in the scriptures of Bhakti, namely, Shanta, Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya, and Madhura,* and realised the same goal through each one of them. His spiritual experience, hitherto gathered, had many forms. Sometimes he willed himself into them, at other times the strong current of his spiritual nature swept him into them in spite of himself. He would commune with invisible beings—forms of the Divinity or Divine Incarnations of the past. Such visions, however, belong to the domain of personality, which is not the last word in spiritual experiences. He was yet to reach a state where knowledge, knower and known become one indivisible Consciousness—a state in which space disappears into nothingness, time is swallowed up in Eternity, causation becomes a dream of the past. He only knows that state who has experienced it. It is all stillness indefinable.

* Shanta is the placid attitude of mind towards Divinity, Dasya is the relation of servant to master, Sakhya is the attitude of friendship, Vatsalya is the relation of parent and child, and Madhura, the highest, is the relation between two lovers.

The soul after a final struggle leaps over the last barrier of relative existence, shatters its prison of matter, and merges in the infinite glory of Brahman. This is called the Nirvikalpa Samadhi—the highest flight of Advaita philosophy. This is the crowning glory of man's spiritual exercises—the last word in his evolution. Then there is no more birth, no more death, nor any further identification with the changes of the body. He leaves behind all the modifications of relativity like a cast-off garment. He realises his identity with the Eternal Brahman, the One without a second. There is no doubt Sri Ramakrishna was the fittest person to realise this state. The field was ready ploughed, and waited only for the sowing of the seed.

At this time there came to the garden of Dakshineswar a wonderful monk Totapuri by name. He was a Punjabi by birth and had renounced the world while quite young. He had been initiated by a Yogi who was the head of a monastery of the Naga sect at Ludhiana in the Punjab. It is said that he practised Sadhana in a secluded forest on the banks of the sacred Nerbudda and attained to the Nirvikalpa Samadhi after rigid discipline extending over forty years. After the passing away of his

Guru, Totapuri took his place as the head of the monastery. A liberated soul, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of the world, he intended to spend the remaining years of his life in making pilgrimages to holy places. Like a lion he roamed at will over the country. He had been to Puri and Gangasagar, and on the return journey along the course of the Ganges, halted at Dakshineswar, where he met with Sri Ramakrishna.

The bright face of the Master at once arrested the attention of Totapuri, who came to understand that Sri Ramakrishna was a highly advanced seeker after truth. Greatly impressed by him Totapuri asked, "Would you like to learn Vedanta?"

"I do not know. It all depends on my Mother. I can agree to your proposal only if She approves of it," was the quiet answer.

"All right," said the monk, "go and ask your mother. I shall not be here long."

Sri Ramakrishna went into the Kali Temple and spoke of the matter to the Mother and in a state of trance heard Her command: "Yes, my boy, go and learn of him. It is for this purpose that he has come here." In a state of semi-consciousness and with a beaming countenance, Sri Ramakrishna returned and said to

Totapuri that he had his Mother's permission. Totapuri could not help smiling at his apparent superstition in addressing the image in the temple as Mother, for, as a Vedantist, he looked upon Shakti—the kinetic state of Brahman, which Sri Ramakrishna worshipped as Mother—as nothing but an illusion. However, he said nothing to Sri Ramakrishna on this point, thinking that under his training the disciple would soon learn the truth and spontaneously brush aside all superstitions.

Sri Ramakrishna had to be initiated into the sacred order of Sannyasa, before he could commence studying the truths of Vedanta. He said that he had no objection provided he could do so in private, for it would be too much for his aged mother, who was living at that time in the sacred precincts of the Dakshineswar Temple, to see her son shave his head and take the monk's vow. To this Totapuri agreed. When the auspicious day arrived, Totapuri asked his disciple to perform the preliminary ceremonies. He went through all these exactly as he was told. The night was almost spent. The teacher and the disciple entered the meditation room. The Guru chanted the holy Mantras, which the disciple repeated as he put oblations one after another into the sacred fire, renouncing, as he

did so, all desire for enjoyments, here and hereafter.

Prostrating himself before his Guru, Sri Ramakrishna took his seat to receive his instructions in Advaita Vedanta. "Brahman," said Totapuri, "is the only Reality, ever-free, beyond the limits of time, space and causation. When a seeker is merged in the beatitude of Samadhi, he does not perceive time and space, nor name and form—the products of inscrutable Maya. Pierce through the maze of name and form and rush out of it like a lion. Dive deep in the search for the Self and be firmly established in It through Samadhi." Totapuri thus tried that day to help Sri Ramakrishna to fix his mind firmly on the Absolute. We describe it in Sri Ramakrishna's own words: "After the initiation 'the naked one'*...asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive into the Atman....I had no difficulty in withdrawing the mind from all other objects except one, the all too familiar form of the Blissful Mother—radiant and of the essence of Pure Consciousness—which appeared before me as a living reality preventing me from passing beyond the realm of name and form....In despair I said to

* Sri Ramakrishna used to refer to Totapuri as Nyangta, i.e., the naked one.

‘the naked one,’ ‘It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with the Atman.’ He grew excited and sharply said, ‘What ! you can’t do it ! But you have to !’ He cast his eyes around, and finding a piece of glass he took it up and pressing the point between my eyebrows said, ‘Concentrate the mind on this point.’ Then with a stern determination I again sat to meditate, and as soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my discrimination as a sword and severed it in two. There remained no more obstruction to my mind, which at once soared beyond the relative plane, and I lost myself in Samadhi !”

Totapuri sat for a long time, silently watching his disciple. Finding him perfectly motionless, he locked the door and went out of the room. Three days passed, and still there was no call. In utter surprise Totapuri opened the door and found Sri Ramakrishna sitting in the very same position in which he had left him. With breathless wonder Totapuri stood before this august spectacle. “Is it really true?” He said to himself, “Is it possible that this man has attained in the course of a single day that which it took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve?” Impelled by doubt, he

made a searching examination. In joyous bewilderment he cried out, "Great God, it is nothing short of a miracle!" It was undoubtedly a case of Nirvikalpa Samadhi—the culmination of the Advaita practice! Totapuri immediately took steps to bring the mind of Sri Ramakrishna down to the world of phenomena. Little by little he came to the consciousness of the outside universe. He opened his eyes and saw his Guru looking at him with tenderness and admiration. The Guru answered the worthy disciple's prostration by locking him in a warm embrace.

Totapuri usually did not stay at any one place for more than three days. But he wished to establish his wonderful new disciple firmly on the lofty plane of Advaita. So he remained eleven months in the garden of Dakshineswar. During this time Totapuri also underwent some mental transformation. We have seen how he looked upon Sri Ramakrishna's praying to the Divine Mother as a superstition. But circumstances compelled Totapuri to believe in the existence of the Divine Mother. Before he left Dakshineswar he realised that Brahman and Shakti are one and the same thing—the two aspects of the same entity.

After Totapuri had left Dakshineswar, the Master was determined to remain in a state of absolute identity with Brahman, far above all subjective and objective experiences. He remained in that state for six months. Referring to this period of his life the Master used to say: "For six months at a stretch I remained in that state whence ordinary men can never return—the body falling off after three weeks like a sere leaf. I was not conscious of day and night. Flies would enter my mouth and nostrils just as they do in a dead body, but I did not feel them. The hair became matted with accretions of dust. There was no chance for the body to survive, it would certainly have perished but for the kind ministrations of a monk who was present at Dakshineswar at the time....He would bring food regularly to me....and as soon as he found me to be a little conscious, he would press some food into my mouth, only a bit of which reached my stomach. Six months passed in this way. At last I received the Mother's command, 'Remain on the threshold of relative consciousness for the sake of humanity.' Then I was laid up with a terrible attack of dysentery....It went on for six months. Thus only did the mind gradually come down to a lower level and consciousness of body...."

IX

TRAVELLING INTO OTHER FAITHS

As a result of the Advaita realisation the mind of Sri Ramakrishna had acquired a wonderful breadth, accepting all forms of religion as so many ways of reaching perfection. Towards the end of 1866, soon after his recovery from dysentery, Sri Ramakrishna was attracted by the faith and devotion of a Sufi mystic, Govinda Rai by name, who had embraced Islam and lived at Dakshineswar at this time. Gradually it came to the mind of Sri Ramakrishna that, since Islam was also a means to the realisation of God, he would see how the Lord blessed the devotees who worshipped that way. He therefore got the necessary initiation from Govinda. To the practice of this new religion the Master applied himself with his characteristic thoroughness. Thus did he describe his mentality at this period: "Then I used to repeat the name of Allah, wear my cloth in the fashion of the Mohammedans and recite the Namaz regularly. All Hindu ideas being wholly banished from the mind, not only did I not salute the Hindu gods, but I had no inclination even to visit them. After three days I realised the goal of that form of devotion." First of all he saw a radiant

Person with a long beard and of grave appearance, and then his mind, passing through the realisation of the Brahman with attributes, was finally absorbed in the Brahman without attributes. That he practised Islam after attaining perfection in the Advaita makes it clear that only through this—the underlying basis of all faiths—can the Hindus and Mohammedans be united with each other.

Seven years later he had a similar realisation of Christianity. In 1874 Sri Ramakrishna came into intimate contact with Sambhu Charan Mallik of Calcutta, who had a garden close to the Dakshineswar Kali Temple. Sri Ramakrishna used to spend a good deal of time in this garden house of Sambhu Mallik, who came to regard the Master with sincere love and esteem and after Mathur's death gladly supplied all his wants. Though not a Christian, he used to read the Bible to Sri Ramakrishna, who thus came to know about Christ and Christianity. He felt a strong desire to realise the Divine Mother by a new method, viz., Christianity, and it was fulfilled in a strange way.

One day the Master was sitting in the parlour of a neighbouring house belonging to a devotee. On the walls were many beautiful portraits, one of them being of Christ. Sri

Ramakrishna was looking attentively at the picture of the Madonna with the Divine Child and reflecting on the wonderful life of Christ, when he felt as though the picture had become animated, and that rays of light were emanating from the figures of Mary and Christ and entering into him, altogether changing his mental outlook. When he realised that his Hindu ideas were being pushed into a corner by this onrush of new ones, he tried his best to stop it and eagerly prayed to the Divine Mother, "What is it that Thou art doing to me, Mother?" But in vain. His love and regard for the Hindu gods were swept away by this tidal wave, and in their stead a deep regard for Christ and the Christian church filled his heart, and opened to his eyes the vision of Christian devotees burning incense and candles before the figure of Jesus in the churches and offering unto him the eager outpourings of their hearts. For three days those ideas held sway in his mind. On the fourth day, as he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw an extraordinary-looking person of serene aspect approaching him with his gaze intently fixed on him. He knew him at once to be a man of foreign extraction. Sri Ramakrishna was charmed and wondered who he might be. Presently the figure drew near, and from the

inmost recesses of Sri Ramakrishna's heart there went up the note: "This is Christ who poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of mankind and suffered agonies for its sake. It is none else but that Master-Yogin Jesus, the embodiment of Love." Then the Son of Man embraced Sri Ramakrishna and became merged in him. At this the Master went into Samadhi and lost all outward consciousness. Thus was Sri Ramakrishna convinced that Jesus Christ was an Incarnation of the Lord.

It will be worth while to note here Sri Ramakrishna's opinion of Buddha and other great founders of religion. About Buddha he shared the general notion of the Hindus that he was an Incarnation of God. He used to offer him his sincere devotion and worship. Once he remarked: "There is not the least doubt about Lord Buddha's being an Incarnation. There is no difference between his doctrines and those of the Vedic Jnanakanda." We have every reason to believe that he spoke thus because of his supernatural insight. About the Tirthankaras who founded the Jain religion, and the ten Sikh Gurus, Sri Ramakrishna heard a good deal in his later life from the lips of representatives of those communities and came to entertain a great regard for them. In his room at Dakshineswar

there were a small statue of Tirthankara Mahavira and a portrait of Christ, before which incense was burnt morning and evening. Of the Sikh Gurus, he used to say that they were all incarnations of the saintly king Janaka.

Thus, as a result of his realisation through all forms of discipline, he was firmly convinced that all religions were true—that every doctrinal system represented a path to God. The three great systems of thought known as Dualism, Qualified Monism and Monism—Dvaita, Vishistadvaita and Advaita—he perceived to be but different stages in man's progress towards the goal. He held that they were not contradictory, but complementary, being suited to different mental outlooks.

Thus he used to say to his disciples :

“I have practised all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths.”

“The tank has several ghats. At one Hindus draw water in pitchers, and call it *jal*; at another Mohammedans draw water in leatheren bottles, and call it *pani*; at a third Christians,

and call it *water*. Can we imagine that the *water* is not *jal*, but only *pani* or *water*? How absurd! The substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same Substance.”

“Every religion of the world is one such ghat. Go direct with a sincere and earnest heart by any of these ghats, and you will reach the water of Eternal Bliss. But say not that your religion is better than that of another.”

“Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God. Diverse are the ways that lead to the temple of Mother Kali at Kalighat in Calcutta. Similarly, various are the paths that take men to the house of the Lord. Every religion is nothing but one of such paths.”

“The mind and intellect can comprehend and put in terms of language the range of thought up to the Vishishtadvaita and no further. In its perfection, the Absolute and Manifestation are seen to be equally real—the Lord’s name, His abode and He Himself are found to be composed of the one spiritual substance. Everything is spiritual, the variance being only in form.”

“The Advaita is the last word in Realisation. It is something to be felt in Samadhi, for it transcends mind and speech.”

Sri Ramakrishna now became convinced that his extraordinary spiritual struggles and realisations were not for himself, but to usher in a new era of spiritual unfoldment and to show mankind how to overcome the obstacles on the way to realisation. He looked upon himself as an Incarnation of God, though he disliked any reference to it.

X

FINDING DIVINITY IN WIFE

As already stated, Sri Ramakrishna became very weak after the attack of dysentery. About the month of May in the year 1867 he started for Kamarpukur accompanied by Hriday and Bhairavi Brahmani for a change. The Master stayed at Kamarpukur for six or seven months. It was a great relaxation for him to enter into the joys and sorrows of the simple village-folk after the stormy days of Sadhana at Dakshineswar. Sarada Devi, his girl wife, was then staying with her father at Jayrambati. Shortly after Sri Ramakrishna's arrival, she was sent for. The Master learned of it, but expressed no opinion. A girl of fourteen, Sarada Devi, or the Holy Mother as she became known later to the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, arrived at Kamarpukur.

Here was a chance for Sri Ramakrishna to test his realisations. By allowing his wife the rightful privileges of her position, he subjected himself to an ordeal from which he emerged brighter than ever. He took special care that she had an all-round training in the discharge of her household duties. The Holy Mother was charmed with the ideal of pure and selfless love

that was shown to her by her saintly husband; she was content to worship him as her Ishta-deva and, by following in his footsteps, to develop her own character. Sri Ramakrishna trained her not only in spiritual things but also in the mundane matters that would make her an ideal mistress of the household. But the Bhairavi Brahmani did not take kindly to the idea of Sri Ramakrishna's doing his duty towards his wife. Perhaps she feared that this would endanger his celibate life. But the Master would not listen to her remonstrances. He remained unruffled and revered her as much as ever. The Brahmani was seized with a sense of false pride, and despite her attainments could not control herself. But subsequently she came to realise her mistakes. She one day approached Sri Ramakrishna with sandal-paste and garlands of flowers which she had taken great pains to prepare, and with these adored him as an Incarnation of Sri Chaitanya. She implored his forgiveness and bade farewell to Kamarpukur. Sri Ramakrishna regained his former health as a result of his prolonged stay in the peaceful environs of his native village, and afterwards returned with Hriday to Dakshineswar.

The holy association of Saradamani with her God-intoxicated husband at Kamarpukur filled

her pure heart with unspeakable delight. Referring to this joy, she said later on, "I used to feel always as if a pitcher full of bliss were placed in my heart—the joy was ineffable." Four years passed after that, and she was now a young woman of eighteen. Wild rumours reached her to the effect that her saintly husband had run mad. After much thought she decided to go to Dakshineswar to see for herself, and reached the place in March, 1872, in the company of her father. Sri Ramakrishna bestowed on her as much love and care as he had previously. He sent her to live in the concert-room with his mother, who had already come there to spend the last days of her life by the side of the Ganges. Convinced after a few days' stay at Dakshineswar that Sri Ramakrishna was unchanged in his attitude towards her, Sarada Devi decided to remain there and give herself over to the service of Sri Ramakrishna and his mother.

Sri Ramakrishna now resumed his old task of teaching his wife, testing at the same time his own realisations and discharging his duties as a husband. His teaching covered a wide range of subjects from housekeeping to the knowledge of Brahman. Not content with merely giving instructions, he took particular

care to see that she carried them out, lovingly correcting any mistake.

Some months after the Holy Mother's arrival, there arose a curious desire in Sri Ramakrishna's mind, which he lost no time in fulfilling. It was the new moon of May, 1872, an auspicious night for the worship of Kali, and Sri Ramakrishna made special arrangements for it in his own room, instructing the Holy Mother to be present. She went there at 9 P.M. Sri Ramakrishna took the seat of the priest. After the preliminaries were over, he beckoned the Holy Mother to the seat which was reserved for the Goddess. Sarada Devi was in a semi-conscious state. Sri Ramakrishna, with the help of an assistant, went through the regular form of worship in which the Holy Mother took the place of the Deity. During the ceremony she passed into Samadhi. The Master too, when he had finished the Mantras, went into the superconscious state. Priest and Goddess were joined in a transcendental union in the Self. At dead of night the Master partially recovered consciousness; then with the appropriate Mantra he surrendered himself and the fruits of his life-long Sadhana, together with his rosary, at the feet of the Holy Mother and saluted her. With this sacred ceremony, called in the Tantras the

Sorashi Puja, or the worship of the Woman, was finished the long series of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices.

One day Sarada Devi, as she was massaging the Master's feet, asked him, "What do you think of me?" Quick came the answer, "The Mother who is worshipped in the temple is the mother who has given birth to this body and is now living in the concert-room, and She again is massaging my feet at this moment. Verily I always look upon you as the visible representation of the Blissful Mother."

Months passed in this way, but not once did the minds of the divine couple come down to the sense plane. This was possible, because both husband and wife had their minds attuned to the Infinite. Sri Ramakrishna complimented Sarada Devi in unequivocal terms. He used to say: "After marriage I anxiously prayed to the Divine Mother to root out all sense of physical enjoyment from her mind. That my prayer had been granted I knew from my contact with her during this period."

XI

PILGRIMAGE

About four years before the incidents narrated towards the close of the last chapter—in 1868—Mathur and his wife arranged for a pilgrimage to Northern India and wanted Sri Ramakrishna to accompany them. At their earnest request the Master consented to be one of the party. They started on January 27th and halted for a few days at Deoghar to visit the shrine of Vaidyanath. Here an interesting thing happened. One day while passing through a neighbouring village, Sri Ramakrishna was greatly distressed to see the wretched condition of its people. Moved with sympathy for them, he said to Mathur, “You are the steward of the Mother. Feed these poor people and give every one a piece of cloth.” Mathur at first hesitated saying, “This pilgrimage will cost a lot of money, and these people are very numerous. We may be short of funds on the journey if we try to feed and clothe them. So what do you say to this, Father?” But Sri Ramakrishna was inexorable. He shed tears at the sight of such abject misery and said in anguish, “Fie upon you! I am not going to Benares. I prefer to remain with these helpless people.”

Like a petulant child he left Mathur's company and sat with the poor villagers. At the sight of his compassion, Mathur was much moved and ordered bales of cloth from Calcutta to distribute among them, and he fed them as well. Sri Ramakrishna then cheerfully started for Benares.

As he approached Benares by boat across the Ganges, the City of Shiva appeared to him to be made of gold—"a condensed mass of spirituality." It seemed as if the precious thoughts of countless monks and devotees had accumulated there, making the place an abode of the gods. Sri Ramakrishna used to visit the shrine of Vishwanath, the presiding Deity of the place, almost daily. He would fall into a trance even on the way, as well as in the presence of the Deity. He also went to visit the noted monks of Benares. One day he paid a visit to the famous Trailanga Swami, who was then under a vow of silence. The Swami beckoned him to take seat and held out his snuff-box to him as a mark of welcome. Sri Ramakrishna asked him some questions, which the Swami replied by gestures. Trailanga Swami was then constructing a bathing ghat. At the instance of Sri Ramakrishna, one of his attendants dug a few spadefuls of earth for the work, which

pleased the Swami greatly. The Master invited him one day to the home of Mathur and entertained him with great respect.

After about a week's stay at Benares the party moved on to Allahabad, where all bathed in the sacred confluence of the Ganges and the Jumna. After three days the party returned to Benares. At the end of a fortnight Mathur and his party went to Vrindavan. During his stay at Vrindavan Sri Ramakrishna was always in high spirits. This sacred place, rich in the countless sweet memories of Sri Krishna, constantly filled his heart with unspeakable emotion. Even the slightest suggestion was enough to plunge him into an ecstasy of delight. It was with great difficulty that he could manage to keep his feelings under control. Sometimes they would break all barriers and throw him into deep and prolonged trances. At Vrindavan he visited Ganga Mata, a Vaishnava woman devotee, noted for her great spiritual realisations. About sixty years old, she had spent the greater part of her life at Vrindavan. At the very first sight she understood the greatness of Sri Ramakrishna, and considered herself blessed to have met him. Sri Ramakrishna also was charmed with her piety and devotion. He stayed at Vrindavan for about a fortnight. He

visited Muttra also. As in Vrindavan so also in Muttra, Sri Ramakrishna was in highly spiritual mood—his mind constantly soaring high—especially at the sight of the spots associated with the memory of Sri Krishna.

The Master returned with Mathur's party to Benares, where they stayed till May. On his return journey Mathur had a mind to visit Gaya. But as Sri Ramakrishna declined to go there, he had to give up the project. The Master thought that if he once visited that sacred place, his mind would leave the physical plane for ever. He knew of his father's vision at Gaya before his birth, and was convinced that his mind would become permanently absorbed in God there. He considered himself an instrument in the hand of the Mother, and bowed to Her decree that his body should remain in the world to carry out Her divine purpose. Accordingly the party returned to Calcutta direct.

It was now sixteen years since Mathur had first met Sri Ramakrishna. A wonderful change had been wrought in his mind during this period. In the month of July, 1871, Mathur was suddenly taken with typhoid fever. From the beginning Sri Ramakrishna knew that this was

to be the end for Mathur. The fateful day arrived. Mathur was taken to Kalighat. That day the Master fell into a deep trance, which lasted two or three hours. After 5 P.M. Sri Ramakrishna regained outward consciousness and calling Hriday to him said that Mathur's soul had gone to the Divine Mother. Late at night the news reached Dakshineswar that Mathur had died exactly at five o'clock. With the death of Mathur there passed away a figure closely associated with Sri Ramakrishna during the most eventful epoch of his life.

XII

CONTACT WITH SOME NOTABLES

Sri Ramakrishna would find delight in meeting the leaders of thought and other prominent men of his time and in studying the spiritual condition of their life. In 1875 he saw Sriput Keshab Chandra Sen, who was the greatest figure of the Brahmo movement of the time. Hearing of his piety, Sri Ramakrishna wished to meet him. He had seen him meditating long ago at the Adi Brahmo Samaj, and had remarked that of all the boys there he was the only one whose meditation was successful.

One afternoon Sri Ramakrishna accompanied by Hriday went to see Keshab, who was then staying with some of his followers in a place not very far from Dakshineswar. Keshab and the other Brahmos at first found nothing remarkable about him. Finally Sri Ramakrishna said, "I hear that you have seen God, so I have come to hear about it." The ensuing conversation held Keshab and his followers under its spell. Sri Ramakrishna then sang a song of Kali the Mother with his usual fervour, in the course of which he fell into Samadhi. Hriday brought his uncle back to ordinary consciousness by chanting the sacred Om in his ears. Sri

Ramakrishna's face was beaming with a divine radiance. A torrent of inspiring words followed, which went straight to the hearts of the listeners. He spoke of the innumerable manifestations of one and the same infinite God, illustrating it by the following parables:

"Some blind men happened to come across an elephant. Someone told them what it was and asked them to describe it as it seemed to them. The one who touched the leg said, 'The elephant is like a column.' The second one said, 'The elephant is like a winnowing fan,'—he had felt one of its ears. Similarly, those who had touched its trunk or belly, gave different opinions. So with God, everyone conceives Him according to his experience."

"A man who had seen a chameleon under a tree returned and said, 'I have seen a beautiful red chameleon under the tree.' Another said, 'I was there before you. The chameleon is not red, but green. I have seen it with my own eyes.' A third said, 'I too know it well. I saw it before either of you, and it was neither red nor green, but—and I saw it with my own eyes—it was blue.' Others declared it was yellow, or grey, and so on. Soon they began to quarrel among themselves as to who was correct. A

man passing by asked what was the trouble. When he was told he said, 'I live under that very tree, and I know the chameleon well. All of you are right, every one. The chameleon is sometimes green, sometimes blue, it is all colours by turn, and sometimes it is absolutely colourless.'"

He ridiculed the attempt of the human mind to fathom the nature of God by comparing it to an ant that desired to carry a whole sugar-hill in its mouth. The inspiring words of the Master so much impressed Keshab that he felt like a child before this man of realisation and listened to him with the utmost reverence. Hence-forward he with some of his devotees began to visit the Master frequently, and long hours were spent in spiritual discussion. Sri Ramakrishna also sometimes visited Keshab in Calcutta. Nagendra Nath Gupta, an eye-witness and formerly editor of the *Tribune*, gives an interesting account of one of such meetings of the two remarkable personages. "By Keshab's express desire," he writes, "I accompanied him on one occasion when he went to see the Paramahamsa at Dakshineswar. The meeting did not take place in the precincts of the temple. Keshab with a small party including myself went by river on a small steam yacht belonging to

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup of Cooch Behar, Keshab's son-in-law. At Dakshineswar Ramakrishna Paramahamsa accompanied by his nephew, Hriday, boarded the launch, which resumed its way upstream. Ramakrishna and Keshab sat on the deck on the bare boards, cross-legged and facing each other. They sat close to each other, and as Ramakrishna grew animated and earnest, he drew still closer to Keshab until his knees and thighs rested on Keshab's lap. I sat next to them, almost touching Keshab. The Paramahamsa stayed in the boat for about eight hours, and except for the few minutes during which he remained in Samadhi he never ceased speaking. From that day to this I have never heard another man speak as he spoke. There was no discussion at all. During all those eight hours Keshab, the brilliant orator and accomplished scholar, scarcely spoke a dozen sentences. All that he did was to put a question at long intervals or to ask for an explanation. The only speaker was Ramakrishna and his words flowed in a steady stream even as the Ganges rippled and flowed underneath us. We heard nothing but that gentle, earnest voice, we saw nothing but the ascetic, lean figure before us, with the half-closed eyes and the hands folded on the lap.

The moving lips uttered the simplest words, but what could soar higher or plumb deeper than those thoughts ! Every thought was a revelation, every parable, every imagery, every simile was a marvel. He spoke of the human face and its various indications of character, he spoke of his own experiences of many forms of devotion, he described the perennial ecstasy of the communion of the Spirit, and when he spoke of the formless (Nirakara) Brahman he passed into Samadhi, a trance in which his face radiated with beatific ecstasy.”

The other leading Brahmos of the time including Pratap Chandra Majumdar, Pandit Vijay Krishna Goswami, Pandit Shivanath Shastri, and Trailokya Nath Sanyal, profited a great deal by their intimate association with Sri Ramakrishna. This contact opened as well a suitable avenue for Sri Ramakrishna to study the mentality of the educated community of Bengal, from which afterwards came the chief instruments for the propagation of his ideas. It was in fact the Brahmos who first gave him an idea of the way the wind was blowing. He saw that they were more influenced by the philosophers of the West than by the seers and prophets of India. Hence they found the greatest difficulty in accepting wholly the ancient

truths of the Hindu religion. But Sri Ramakrishna was not at all dismayed by this state of things. Behind this too he saw the hand of God. So, with undiminished love he told the Brahmos all about his realisations and gave out the essence of his teachings, such as the necessity of renunciation, the sincere pursuit of one's own course of discipline, faith in God, the performance of one's duties in the world without thought of results, and discrimination between right and wrong. From that time Sri Ramakrishna had an intimate association also with other notables of the time such as Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, Kristodas Pal, Rajendra Lal Mitra, Aswini Kumar Dutt, and the like. Through them the message of the Master reached a wider circle of people, who now began to flock to him in large numbers for spiritual comfort and guidance.

XIII

THE COMING OF DEVOTEES

Sri Ramakrishna was now burning with a tremendous desire to meet his devotees—the favoured children of the Divine Mother—to whom he might pass his realisations for the good of humanity and the world. About this he would say later, “There was no limit to the yearning I had then. During the daytime I managed somehow to control it. The secular talk of the worldly-minded was galling to me, and I would look forward wistfully to the day when my beloved companions would come. I hoped to find solace in conversing with them and unburdening my mind by telling them of my realisations. Every little incident would remind me of them, and thoughts of them wholly engrossed my mind. When during the evening service the temple rang with the sound of bells and conch-shells, I would climb to the roof of the building in the garden, and writhing in anguish of heart, cry at the top of my voice, ‘Come, my boys ! Oh, where are you ? I cannot bear to live without you !’ A mother never longs so intensely for the sight of her child, nor a friend for his companion, nor a lover for his sweetheart, as I did for them ! Oh, it was

indescribable. Shortly after this yearning, the devotees began to come in."

The first two persons who responded to the call of Sri Ramakrishna were Ramachandra Dutt and Manomohan Mitra, who were cousins and lived in Calcutta. The former was a medical practitioner and a lecturer in the Calcutta Medical College. He came across a copy of a newspaper conducted by Keshab Chandra Sen wherein he read about Sri Ramakrishna. One afternoon in 1879 Ramachandra accompanied by Manomohan visited Dakshineswar and met the Master. They were charmed at his kindness, for such cordiality and sympathy at first sight they had never experienced before. Sri Ramakrishna's love seemed so new and so genuine to them, because it was selfless. From this time on, their lives took a different turn. Not being content with going to see the Master themselves, Manomohan and Ram induced their relatives and friends also to go to Dakshineswar to be blessed by coming in contact with the Master. By this time other devotees were visiting Sri Ramakrishna, and every Sunday his small room was crowded. These devotees became acquainted with one another, and those who were practising religious exercises under the guidance of the Master, formed themselves into

a sort of spiritual brotherhood. Now and then Sri Ramakrishna would accept invitations from Calcutta to visit devotees, and these meetings gradually took the shape of little festivals.

Ramachandra had a friend named Surendra Nath Mitra who lived close to him. He held an important position in an English firm. At first a Bohemian, he became a changed man through the influence of Sri Ramakrishna's love. His purse was always open for the Master's comfort. After the passing of the Master he became the mainstay of the Baranagore monastery from its very start.

Balaram Bose, another householder disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was a rich zemindar of Orissa. From his first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar in 1882, he became exceedingly devoted to him and supplied all his necessaries up to the last. It was in his Calcutta house at Baghbazar that Sri Ramakrishna very often met his devotees and spent the time in devotional songs and inspiring spiritual discourses.

It was in March, 1882, that Mahendra Nath Gupta, better known as Master Mahashaya, or M., the immortal writer of the *Kathamrita* (a Bengali book recording the conversations of Sri Ramakrishna), first met the Master at Dakshin-

eswar. He was then Headmaster of Pandit Vidyasagar's Branch High School at Shyambazar and was all along an educationist. He ranked very high among the Master's intimate followers. Through his personal touch hundreds of eager aspirants, young and old, received great spiritual impetus, while his *Kathamrita*, as a photographic record of the highest spiritual experiences of man in the simplest language, has no equal in the whole range of scriptural literature.

Another distinguished devotee of Sri Ramakrishna was Durga Charan Nag, better known as Nag Mahashaya, who came of poor parents in the village named Deobhog in the District of Dacca. From his boyhood his one absorbing thought was how to escape worldly bonds. He was told that without realisation of God there was no salvation. He spent night after night in prayer and meditation, but with no success. At last, while practising as a physician in Calcutta, he came under the holy influence of Sri Ramakrishna and by his life of absolute non-attachment, humility, self-effacement and purity of character subsequently rose to be the foremost householder devotee of the Master.

The name of Girish Chandra Ghosh is a household word in Bengal as the greatest

dramatist in the Bengali language and the father of the Bengali stage. He was a victim of the first impact of the materialistic culture of the West on Indian society, and led a reckless life before he came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna in 1884. From that time he was a thoroughly changed man and had unbounded faith in Sri Ramakrishna. The Master used to extol his intelligence very highly. His unique devotion and self-surrender marked him out as one of the greatest of the householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna.

Hundreds of such sincere devotees clustered round Sri Ramakrishna, whose pregnant utterances and magnetic personality completely changed the course of their lives and made them blessed.

XIV

MONASTIC DISCIPLES

The vision of Sri Ramakrishna that a galaxy of pure and earnest souls imbued with the lofty spirit of renunciation and service would receive his message of universal love and harmony and carry it to humanity soon came to be materialised. One by one these heroic souls who were subsequently transformed into mighty spiritual figures by the magic touch of the Master gathered round him. This batch of disciples consisted mostly of ardent young men who afterwards left their hearth and home and embraced monastic life.

First among these to come was Latu (Swami Adbhutananda), who belonged to a poor family in the District of Chapra in Bihar. He had the privilege of serving Sri Ramakrishna for nearly six years and attained great spiritual heights even during the lifetime of the Master.

Rakhal Chandra Ghosh (Swami Brahmananda), son of a zemindar of Basirhat, Twenty-four Perganas, first met Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar in 1880. The Master looked upon him as his "Spiritual Child." Rakhal was one of the class described by the Master as Nitya-siddha (eternally perfect). Subsequently he

became the first President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and developed this infant institution into a powerful organisation.

Gopal Sur (Swami Advaitananda) was rather advanced in years, and Sri Ramakrishna used to designate him as "aged Gopal" because of his age. He ultimately renounced the world and joined the Baranagore monastery.

Narendra Nath Dutt (Swami Vivekananda) came of an enlightened aristocratic family of Calcutta. Even in his boyhood he developed an introspective habit of mind and became an adept in meditation. He met the Master first in 1880, and after his graduation from the Calcutta University in 1882 he felt an indomitable urge for spiritual realisation. Under the careful guidance of the Master he attained the highest spiritual illumination, and his heart at the same time was filled to overflowing with love for humanity. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna it was Swami Vivekananda who organised his brother disciples into a spiritual fraternity and laid the foundation of the institution which has developed into the present Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Swami Vivekananda's noble vindication of Hinduism in the West as well as in India, his great spiritual attainments, his burning patriotism, his lifelong

service for the uplift of the downtrodden masses of India, and his high-souled effort to bring about a cultural and spiritual union between the East and the West—all these have combined to secure for him a pre-eminent position amongst the world's noblest men.

Tarak Nath Ghoshal (Swami Shivananda) belonged to the illustrious Ghoshal family of Barasat in the District of Twenty-four Perganas. From his very boyhood Tarak used to practise meditation. In his very first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna in 1882, he was deeply impressed and made Sri Ramakrishna the pole-star of his life. Afterwards, in 1922, he became the second President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Baburam Ghosh (Swami Premananda) first met Sri Ramakrishna in Calcutta in 1882. The Master spoke very highly of his purity of character and classed him as "eternally perfect." His unostentatious life of contemplation and service and his unbounded affection for all have enthroned him in the hearts of innumerable devotees and admirers.

Another young devotee of extraordinary spirituality who came to Sri Ramakrishna was Nitya Niranjan Sen (Swami Niranjanananda). He afterwards dedicated himself entirely to the service of the Master.

Yogindra Nath Ray Chowdhury (Swami Yogananda), who came of an aristocratic Brahmin family of Dakshineswar, first came into close contact with Sri Ramakrishna about the year 1882. Sri Ramakrishna spoke of him as being one of the chosen few of the Divine Mother.

Sarat Chandra Chakravarti (Swami Saradananda) and **Sasibhushan Chakravarti (Swami Ramakrishnananda)** were cousins of a pious Brahmin family of Calcutta. They met Sri Ramakrishna in 1883 and eventually took refuge at the feet of the Master. Swami Saradananda became the first Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and in his Bengali book, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna-Lilaprasanga*, has left a monumental exposition of his Master's sublime life. Swami Ramakrishnananda's services during the last illness of Sri Ramakrishna were unparalleled. The Ramakrishna Math and the Students' Home at Mylapore, Madras, are a living testimony to the devoted service of this great soul. Of Sasi and Sarat Sri Ramakrishna used to say that both of them were followers of Jesus Christ in a former incarnation.

Harinath Chatterjee (Swami Turiyananda) of Baghbazar was another great disciple who was attracted by the magnetic personality of the Master. His great ascetic habit and extra-

ordinary fortitude easily marked him out as a great Yogi. His letters and conversations, as recorded, are an unfailing source of spiritual enlightenment.

Gangadhar Ghatak (Swami Akhandananda) was a friend of Harinath, and he also first met Sri Ramakrishna on the same occasion. He was the first amongst the monastic disciples of the Master to start philanthropic work in India as early as 1894. He became President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in 1934 after the passing away of Swami Shivananda.

Hariprasanna Chatterjee (Swami Vijnanananda) of Belgharia was introduced to Sri Ramakrishna in 1883 by his friends Sarat and Sasi while he was a college student. After holding important government posts as an engineer, he renounced the world and subsequently became President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission after the passing away of Swami Akhandananda in 1937.

Kali Prasad Chandra (Swami Abhedananda) first came to see Sri Ramakrishna about the end of the year 1883. He was a great scholar in Vedanta, and on account of his constant spiritual practices he was known in his early monastic days as "Kali Tapaswi." He did much to spread the message of Vedanta in America.

Subodh Chandra Ghosh (Swami Subodhananda) was a High School student of seventeen when he first met the Master in 1885. On his second visit, Subodh had, at the mystic touch of the Master, a deep spiritual experience. He belonged to the family of Shankar Ghosh, the founder of the famous Kali Temple of Thanthania, Calcutta.

Saradaprasanna Mitra (Swami Trigunatitananda) was quite a boy when he met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time in 1885. He came of a zemindar family of Barasat, Twenty-four Perganas. Under the instructions of Swami Vivekananda he started the *Udbodhan*, the Bengali organ of the Ramakrishna Math, and edited it till his departure for San Francisco, U. S. A., in 1902, where he successfully preached Vedanta and laid down his life in 1914.

These were some of the most distinguished monastic disciples who dedicated themselves to the service of the Master and moulded their lives according to the lofty ideal of renunciation which Sri Ramakrishna set before them. Having thus gathered together his chosen few, Sri Ramakrishna made them his closest companions and, with the tender affection of a mother, guided them step by step to the supreme realisation of God.

XV

WOMEN DEVOTEES

We have already seen that Sri Ramakrishna's realisation lifted him above all sex-consciousness and enabled him to approach men and women with the innocence and simplicity of a child. He looked upon every woman as the living embodiment of the Divine Mother. Women devotees who flocked to him for spiritual guidance and help in God-realisation felt not the least scruple or uneasiness in his presence. He read their thoughts and understood their feelings as easily as those of men. And as his mind was absolutely pure, it was but natural that he evoked only the highest sentiments in them. He advised them to renounce lust and greed for wealth, and struggle for God-realisation. Lives of some of his distinguished women devotees including Yogen Ma, Golap Ma, Aghormani Devi (better known as Gopal's mother), Gauri Ma, Lakshnimani Devi, furnish illuminating instances of how the pure and unalloyed devotion and spirit of absolute self-surrender can bestow supreme illumination on all sincere seekers irrespective of caste or sex. The magnetic touch of Sri Ramakrishna's divine love transformed their lives into pure gold and made them

recipients of the transcendental bliss. Many among such women devotees, even though belonging to highly aristocratic families, flung to the four winds all social conventions and sometimes walked the whole distance from Calcutta to Dakshineswar in their eagerness to hear words of wisdom from Sri Ramakrishna. The Master, with his usual love and readiness, fulfilled the aspirations of these earnest souls and thus built up a brilliant group of women devotees. Their lives became in time an unfailing source of spiritual comfort to a large number of aspirants.

But no life was so angelic and impressive, so simple and yet sublime, as that of the Master's own consort, Sarada Devi, who enjoyed the unique privilege of living intimately with him and receiving for years the requisite spiritual training. Her life of intense Sadhana, under the affectionate guidance of the Master, culminating in supreme spiritual realisation is a luminous instance of how conjugal relation can be spiritualised. She was, in fact, an ideal wife as well as a superb nun. Her life was one long stillness of prayer. With her infinite patience and overflowing motherly love, the Holy Mother was a never-failing source of solace to all troubled souls that sought refuge with her. Her

life was a marvellous synthesis of knowledge and devotion, Yoga and work. No wonder that Sri Ramakrishna, at the conclusion of his spiritual practices, worshipped her as the personification of the Divine Mother.

XVI

LAST DAYS

The closing years of Sri Ramakrishna's life, though full of pathos, were as sublime and graceful as the mellowed beauty of a glorious sunset. Dakshineswar, once a silent and solitary retreat, was now the resort of hundreds of earnest souls who crowded his small room from morning till night to receive spiritual guidance. Sri Ramakrishna, without the least consideration for his personal comfort or convenience, always ministered to the spiritual needs of these eager aspirants with his usual alacrity and zeal. Sometimes his small room would remain packed with devotees for hours together, and he could hardly get a moment's respite for meals as also for giving relaxation to his overtaxed physical frame. His heart beat with every throb of all the hearts that ached, known and unknown, and he gave out his whole being unto them in the fulness of love and compassion. He often inspired the hearts of these sincere souls with his devotional songs and illuminating gospel as also with the narration of his own spiritual struggles and realisations. Sometimes his room would ring with the swelling cadence of songs sung with unspeakable fervour by the assembled

devotees. The whole atmosphere remained surcharged with spirituality, and everyone that came into intimate touch with the Master felt a maddening enthusiasm for God-realisation. There is a saying that when the flower blooms, bees come uninvited to suck the honey therefrom. This was exactly the case with Sri Ramakrishna. Attracted by the Master's spiritual life, persons of all denominations and stations of life began to flock to him.

His was indeed a life which furnished a happy solution to the manifold intricate problems of human existence. The entire spiritual history of humanity was compressed, as it were, into the brief span of fifty years that the Master was destined to live on earth, and during this period there was practically no religion he did not live and no Truth he did not realise. His life thus became a mighty confluence of the diverse streams of human thought, where the weary pilgrims could meet and slake their spiritual thirst. No wonder that the universal message of such a unique personality was hailed with enthusiasm by all irrespective of caste, creed or colour.

But his feeble health began to break down under the stress of constant ecstasies as also of frequent religious discourses with numerous

devotees. Sometimes like a cross child he would complain to the Mother: "Why do you bring hither all those people who are like milk diluted with five times its own quantity of water? My eyes are destroyed with blowing the fire to dry up the water. My health is gone. It is beyond my strength. Do it Yourself if You want it done. This (pointing to his body) is nothing but a burst drum, and if You go on beating it day in and day out, how long do You think it will last?" But in spite of this tremendous physical exertion, he did not in the least relax his effort to give spiritual comfort to the distressed souls, even if they came to him at odd hours. He never turned anybody away. His sense of temporary bodily weakness was swept away by the compelling spirit of his infinite compassion for ignorant and suffering humanity. "Let me be condemned to be born over and over again even in the form of a dog," he would burst out saying, "if so I can be of help to a single soul. I would give up twenty thousand such bodies to help one man. It is glorious to help even one man." So deep was his solicitude for all that he sometimes blamed himself for falling into trances as they absorbed much of the time that could otherwise have been utilised for the spiritual benefit of others.

During the sultry months of the year 1885 the Master suffered a great deal from the terrible heat, which was alleviated by the taking of ice which the devotees brought to him daily. But this frequent use of ice produced a pain in the throat which was at first so trifling as to pass unnoticed. But in a month it became so aggravated that the disciples grew alarmed and called in a specialist in diseases of the throat. Notwithstanding the prescription of various remedies, his condition did not show any sign of improvement. On days of the full and the new moon, the pain became more acute; it was impossible for him to eat solid food. The doctors diagnosed the disease as "Clergyman's sore throat." The Master carried out the doctor's injunctions faithfully, except on two points, viz., checking the divine ecstasies and giving rest to the vocal organs. As soon as he spoke of God, he lost all consciousness of the body and fell into Samadhi. Nor would he stop speaking to people who, afflicted by the world, came to him for solace. No wonder his health broke down.

The disease proved more and more obstinate. A house was soon engaged at Shyampukur in Calcutta, and in the beginning of September, 1885, the Master was removed to the new prem-

ises, to provide better facilities for medical care. Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar, the then veteran Homeopath and the founder of the Association for the Cultivation of Science, was entrusted with the treatment of Sri Ramakrishna. When Dr. Sarkar learned that the devotees who had brought the Master to Calcutta for treatment were defraying all expenses, he offered his services free as a labour of love.

The devotees now keenly felt the necessity of securing able hands to prepare the Master's food and to nurse him by night as well as by day. It could be done only through the combined efforts of the Holy Mother and the young devotees. News was accordingly sent to the Holy Mother at Dakshineswar. The Holy Mother, as was her wont, throwing aside all considerations of personal comfort volunteered to come at once to Shyampukur and undertake the task. Thus when the question of preparing the Master's diet was settled, attention was given to the matter of night duty. Narendra Nath took this charge upon himself and began to pass the night at Shyampukur. Fired by his example, a few sturdy youths such as Gopal Junior (a new recruit), Kali, and Sasi lent their aid. Narendra's sacrifice for the sake of the

Master, his inspiring talks and association with them made an indelible impression upon their minds, and banishing all selfishness, they resolved to consecrate their lives to the noble ideal of service unto the Guru and realisation of God. It is interesting to note that though only four or five were attracted to this labour of love at its initial stage at Shyampukur, the number of such workers was almost quadrupled towards the last. The guardians of the boys seeing them neglect their studies and stay with the Master grew alarmed and had recourse to various means to bring them back to their home. But the boys, with the glorious object-lesson of Narendra Nath before them, stood firm as rocks. The selfless enthusiasm of the devotees centred on a common object of adoration, immediately binding them together; and the Ramakrishna Brotherhood, though it had its origin at Dakshineswar, owed most of its growth to the holy associations of Shyampukur and the Cossipore garden.

Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar took up in right earnest the task of treating the Master. After the examination was over he would spend hours with Sri Ramakrishna in various religious discourses. Thus by degrees Dr. Sarkar became more and more attached to the Master. As a

result of this intimate relation established between the Master and Dr. Sarkar, the latter's admiration for the former soon ripened into a kind of worship.

While at Shyampukur Sri Ramakrishna one day had a vision of his subtle body emerging from the gross sheath and moving about the room. It had a number of sores on the back. He was puzzled by the sight, but it was made clear to him that the touch of profane people had caused those sores on the body. They themselves had been purified, but their sins had been visited on him. When he described this vision to his devotees, Narendra and some others observed that the Master's vision was in conformity with the doctrine of vicarious atonement postulated in certain religions like Christianity and Vaishnavism.

Two months passed, but there was no sign of improvement. On the contrary the condition of the Master was gradually going from bad to worse. When treatment proved ineffectual, Dr. Sarkar advised a change to some garden-house outside the city. Accordingly the spacious garden-house of Gopal Chandra Ghosh at Cossipore was hired. In the afternoon of the 11th of December, 1885, Sri Ramakrishna was removed to the new premises.

XVII

END OF THE DRAMA

At the Cossipore Garden was played the last chapter of the Master's life on the physical plane. On the eve of his exit from the arena of the world, the Master showed himself at his highest, and, making Narendra Nath the fit instrument for the propagation of his ideas, entrusted to him the charge of his flock. The pathos and sublimity of this closing scene can only be felt, not described.

Soon after coming, the boys divided among themselves the task of cooking, marketing and other household duties. The Holy Mother had the charge of preparing the food as well as of feeding the Master. Narendra was the leader of the young disciples. When they were not occupied in the service of the Master, he would bring them together and engage them in meditation, study, discussion or songs. Thus busied, they were always in a delightful atmosphere, and time passed unnoticed. Though the number of these sacrificing youths did not exceed twelve, yet every one of them, by the consecration of his life to the service of the Guru, appeared a tower of strength.

When through the united effort of the older and younger devotees the treatment and nursing of the Master were going smoothly, Narendra one night called some of these young boys to his side and said: "The Master's disease is very serious. Perhaps he intends to lay down his body. Strive your best for spiritual uplift through service unto him along with prayer and meditation while yet there is time. After his passing there will be no end to your repentance. We are wasting time in the foolish thought that we shall pray to God after finishing this or that business at hand. We are fastening more chains of desire on ourselves, and desires mean death. We must root them out at once." It was a cold starry night, and perfect stillness reigned everywhere. Narendra's introspective mind caught the contagion of the hour and felt disposed to meditate. He sat under a tree, and, seeing a stack of dry hay and twigs near by, said: "Set fire to that. At this hour the monks light their meditation fire. Let us do the same and burn up our desires." The fire was lighted. The young devotees put the faggots into the fire and made a holocaust of their desires at the same time. The very thought filled their hearts with unspeakable joy. They actually felt that their minds were

being purged and that they were coming closer to God.

At this time occurred an event of great importance, showing the Master's wonderful love for his devotees and his extraordinary spiritual power. It was the 1st of January, 1886. Sri Ramakrishna felt much better and wished to take a walk in the garden. It was about three in the afternoon. As it was a holiday, about thirty lay disciples were present, some in the hall and others under the trees. When Sri Ramakrishna came down, those in the hall saluted him and followed him at a distance as he walked slowly towards the gate. Girish, Ram, Atul, and some others also came and saluted the Master. Sri Ramakrishna suddenly said to Girish, "Well, Girish, what have you found in me that you proclaim me before all as an Incarnation?" Girish, not at all taken aback by the question, knelt before him with folded hands and said in a voice shaken with emotion, "What can an insignificant creature like me say about One whose glory even sages like Vyasa and Valmiki could not measure?" Hearing these words, spoken with the greatest intensity, Sri Ramakrishna was deeply moved and said: "What more shall I say? I bless you all! Be illumined!" Saying this he fell into a state

of semi-consciousness. The devotees heard these solemn words and became mad with joy. Overwhelmed with emotion they moved forward to take the dust of his feet, and saluted him. At this manifestation of devotion, Sri Ramakrishna's mercy overstepped its bounds, and he touched them all, one by one, with appropriate blessings. This powerful touch revolutionised their minds, and the devotees, so blessed by the Master, had wonderful spiritual experiences. They, upon coming down from that state of spiritual exaltation, realised that the Master was showering his grace upon all without distinction.

Sri Ramakrishna, knowing his end to be very near, was busy preparing his chief disciple, Narendra Nath, for the great task which was later to be his. One day the Master expressly commissioned him to look after the young devotees, saying: "I leave them in your care. See that they practise spiritual exercises and do not return home." He was thus silently training them for the monastic life; and one day he asked Narendra and other young men to beg their food in the streets. They all went out with begging-bowls in hand. The Master was overjoyed to think that it would not be long before these young men, clad in the ochre robe of the Sannyasin, would go begging their

food from door to door and conferring upon humanity the highest blessings of religion. One day Gopal Senior expressed his desire to the Master to distribute ochre cloths and Rudraksha rosaries among Sannyasins. Pointing to his young disciples, Sri Ramakrishna answered, "You won't find better monks than these anywhere. Give your cloths and things to them." Gopal placed a bundle of ochre cloths before the Master, who distributed them among his young disciples. One evening the Master made them go through a ceremony and permitted them to receive food from the houses of all irrespective of caste. Thus it was that the disciples were initiated into the monastic order by the Master himself, and the foundation of the future Ramakrishna Order was laid.

We have seen Narendra Nath's aspirations for the highest Truth and his struggle to attain it. One evening, as he was meditating, it came to him quite unexpectedly. At first he felt as if a light had been placed behind his head. Then he passed beyond all relativity and was lost in the Absolute. He had attained the Nirvikalpa Samadhi! When he gained a little consciousness of the world, he found only his head, but not his body. He cried out, "Ah, where is my body?" Hearing his voice Gopal

Senior came into the room. Naren repeated the query. "Here it is, Naren," answered Gopal. When that failed to convince Naren, Gopal was terrified and hastened to inform the Master. The latter only said, "Let him stay in that state for a while! He has teased me long enough for it!" After a long time Narendra came to the consciousness of the physical world and found his brother disciples clustered about him. An ineffable peace bathed his soul. When he came to the Master, the latter said: "Now the Mother has shown you all. But this realisation of yours shall be locked up for the present, and the key will remain with me. When you will have finished doing Mother's work, this treasure will again be yours."

In the meanwhile Sri Ramakrishna was sinking daily; his body was worn to a skeleton, and his diet was reduced to a minimum. All this grieved the devotees. They knew now that they were going to lose the great mainstay of their lives. When the pain was excruciating, the Master would only whisper with a smile, "Let the body and its pain take care of each other, thou, my mind, be always in bliss!" One night he whispered to Mahendra: "I am bearing all this cheerfully because otherwise you would be weeping. If you all will say that it is better

that the body should go rather than suffer this torture, I am willing." The devotees however begged him to ask the Divine Mother to make his body last, but he gazed at them tenderly and said, "How can I ask Her for anything when my will is entirely merged in Hers?" He consoled them by saying: "He (the Lord) comes with His devotees as a man—as an Incarnation. The devotees again return with Him. A band of minstrels appears before a house. They sing and dance, and go away as suddenly as they came, nobody knows them!"

In spite of failing strength the Master continued his spiritual work. One day he initiated Narendra with the name of Rama, which, he said, was his own Ishta Mantra. It produced a miraculous effect. Narendra was filled with bliss, and in the intoxication of it went round and round the house uttering the name of Rama. He was in such an exalted mood that none dared approach him. After this had gone on for hours the other disciples grew alarmed and reported it to Sri Ramakrishna, who simply said, "Let him be. He will recover in due course." But it was four o'clock before Narendra regained normal consciousness.

About eight or nine days before his passing, Sri Ramakrishna asked Yogin to read to him

from the Bengali almanac the dates from the twenty-fifth Shravana (9th August) onwards. Yogin read until he came to the last day of the month. The Master then made a sign that he did not want to hear any more. Four or five days after this, the Master called Narendra to his side. There was nobody else in the room. He made Narendra sit before him and gazing at him fell into Samadhi. Narendra felt a subtle force like an electric shock penetrating his body. Gradually he too lost outward consciousness. He did not remember how long he sat there. When he came to normal consciousness, he found Sri Ramakrishna in tears. The Master said to him: "To-day I have given you all and have become a Fakir! Through this power you will do immense good to the world, and then only shall you go back." In this way Sri Ramakrishna passed on his powers to Narendra; henceforth the Master and the disciple became one soul.

A couple of days later the idea entered Narendra's mind of testing Sri Ramakrishna's statement that he was an Incarnation. He said to himself, "If in the midst of this dreadful physical pain he can declare his Godhead, then I shall believe him." Strange to say, the moment this thought came to him, Sri Rama-

krishna summoning all his energy said distinctly, "He who was Rama and Krishna, is now Ramakrishna in this body—but not in your Vedantic sense!" Narendra was stricken with shame and remorse for having doubted the Master even after so many revelations.

At last the eventful day arrived—a day of intense grief for the devotees. It was Sunday, August 15th, 1886—the last day of Shravana. The Master's suffering was at its highest. The devotees wept in grief. They stood by the bedside of the Master. In the evening he suddenly fell into Samadhi. The body became stiff. There was something about this Samadhi which struck Sasi as unusual, and he began to weep. After midnight Sri Ramakrishna regained consciousness. The Master in a clear voice uttered thrice the name of Kali and gently lay down. Suddenly at two minutes past one, a thrill passed through the Master's body, making the hair stand on end. The eyes became fixed on the tip of the nose and the face was lit up with a smile. The Master entered into Maha-samadhi. Thus in the early hours of Monday, the 16th of August, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna departed from the world, leaving behind a host of grief-stricken devotees and admirers.

At five o'clock the sacred body was brought down and laid on a cot. It was dressed in ochre cloth and decorated with sandal-paste and flowers. An hour later, the body was carried to the burning ghat at Baranagore, to the accompaniment of devotional music. Spectators shed tears as they saw the solemn procession pass. The body was placed on the funeral pyre, and within a couple of hours everything was finished.

A calm resignation came to the devotees as they prepared to leave the cremation ground, for they all realised the Master's eternal presence within. He, their Lord, was the same in the disembodied state as in the physical life. According to his own words, he had passed from one chamber to another, that was all. They put the sacred relics of the Master's body into an urn and returned to the Cossipore garden, shouting, "Victory to Bhagavan Rama-krishna."

XVIII

AFTER THE PASSING

Close contact for so long with such burning renunciation and godliness made it impossible for the young disciples to return to the world. Though they were without resources, some householder disciples of the Master came forward with the necessary pecuniary assistance and encouraged them to found a home where the brotherhood would live together and the householders would also find a temporary refuge from their worldly cares. A half-ruined house was rented at Baranagore where one by one almost all the young disciples of the Master gathered under the leadership of Narendra Nath. Thus the Master's dearly cherished ideal of monasticism took a concrete shape after his passing.

The Holy Mother tried to overcome her sense of irreparable loss by undertaking a vigorous course of Sadhana at Vrindavan, Calcutta or her native village. One part of the pre-ordained purpose of her union with Sri Ramakrishna had been fulfilled, viz., the setting up of an ideal for the householders of to-day to follow according to their respective capacities. There still remained another part to be accom-

plished, viz., the transmission of the Master's spiritual power to thousands of devotees, and specially to women. It was for this that her valuable life was spared to humanity for many years.

During the latter part of December, 1886, the members of the Baranagore monastery went to Antpur, a village in the District of Hooghly, at the invitation of the mother of Baburam, one of the disciples of the Master. Here Narendra gathered all the young disciples of the Master, and in the fervour of spiritual enthusiasm which was evoked here, the bond of fellowship among them was definitely sealed. The enthusiasm reached its height, quite unconsciously, on Christmas Eve, when before a burning log of wood Narendra and his brothers kept vigil, talking passionately of the life of Christ and the glories of renunciation. This stirred up the dormant spirit of renunciation in those who had lagged behind, and shortly after their return, the Baranagore monastery had its full complement of monks, all pledged to a life of the highest asceticism.

No chronicler can do full justice to the intense spiritual life these young monks led at Baranagore. The more they felt the absence

of the Master on the physical plane, the more intense was their desire to realise him as the expression of Eternal Truth in the recesses of their hearts. No amount of privation or hardship, indifference or contumely, was allowed to stand in their way. Fired with the tales of the tremendous austerities of the Master, these monks practised them to a great extent as regards food, dress and other necessities of life. How to realise God was their one absorbing thought. Character-building and realisation became the watch-word of their lives. Some even thought of ending their lives by continued meditation without food. Narendra was the leader of the group. He was alive to the difficulties of the religious path. So, with the utmost caution he began to mould their lives. He tried to broaden their outlook by saturating their minds with universal ideas and making them conversant with the essentials of the different branches of human knowledge. The topics he took up for discussion were many and varied, ranging from comparative religion and philosophy to history and science. Most of the sublime ideas which he gave to the world afterwards as the great Swami Vivekananda, were not new to these brother monks, for they had

heard them in the Baranagore days, or even earlier at Cossipore.

After some time even the holy atmosphere of the Baranagore Math seemed to become constricting to them. They were anxious to go out into the wide world and live as wandering monks, depending solely on God. All, except Sasi who chose to stay by the sacred relics of the Master at the Math, one by one embraced a wandering life, determined to tread the path of austerity and renunciation hallowed by the footsteps of the ancient Indian monks.

They wandered all over the country from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, relying upon God. They had to undergo the travails of a new birth to become the spiritual giants the world knew later. Behind this metamorphosis there was the constant and unerring hand of the Man who chiselled their characters, curbed the impetuosity of their spirit, held tight the reins that directed their course, and brought about their perfection. As a matter of fact, every one of these young men whom the Master had made his very own represented one or more phases of his own multiple personality. The great qualities of head and heart which found expression in these spiritual giants give us some idea, at least, of how wonderful must have been

the illustrious Prototype in whom these qualities appeared in the highest degree. When the Swami Vivekananda rose to the highest pinnacle of his fame, when East and West vied with each other to honour him, this was the tribute he paid to his Master :

“ If there has been anything achieved by me, by thoughts, or words, or deeds, if from my lips has ever fallen one word that has helped any one in the world, I lay no claim to it, it was his. But if there have been curses falling from my lips, if there has been hatred coming out of me, it is all mine, and not his. All that has been weak has been mine, and all that has been life-giving, strengthening, pure and holy, has been his inspiration, his words, and he himself. Yes, my friends, the world has yet to know that man.”

SOME SAYINGS

1. You see many stars at night in the sky but find them not when the sun rises; can you say that there are no stars in the heaven of day? So, O man, because you behold not God in the days of your ignorance, say not that there is no God.
2. God is formless and God is with form too, and He is that which transcends both form and formlessness. He alone can say what else He is.
3. God with form is visible, nay we can touch Him, as one does his dearest friend.
4. So long as the sound of a bell is audible, it exists in the region of form; but when it is no longer heard, it has become formless. Similarly God is both with form and formless.
5. The watchman can see with a dark lantern (bull's-eye) everyone on whom he throws its rays, but no one can see him so long as he does not turn the light upon himself. So does God see everyone but no one sees Him until the Lord reveals Himself to him in His mercy.
6. The sun lights up the earth, but a small cloud will hide it from our view. Similarly, the insignificant veil of Maya prevents us from seeing

the omnipresent and all-witnessing Sachchidananda—Existence-Knowledge-Bliss.

7. If I hold this cloth before me, you cannot see me any more though I am still as near to you as ever. So also, though God is nearer to you than anything else, yet by reason of the screen of egoism you cannot see Him.

8. When shall I be free? When that "I" has vanished. "I and mine" is ignorance: "Thou and Thine" is knowledge.

9. By acquiring the conviction that all is done by the will of God, one becomes only a tool in His hand. Then one is free, even in this life.

10. If after all you cannot destroy this "I" then let it remain as "I the servant." The self that knows itself as the servant and lover of God will do little mischief.

11. If you are in right earnest to be good and pure, God will send you the Sat Guru, the right teacher. Earnestness is the one thing necessary.

12. Very few understand that the aim of human life is to see God.

13. The worldly-minded never come to their senses, even though they suffer and have

terrible experiences. Camels are very fond of thorny shrubs. The more they eat of them, the more do their mouths bleed, yet they do not refrain from making them their food.

14. As a boy holding to a post or pillar whirls about it with headlong speed without fear of falling; so perform your worldly duties, fixing your hold firmly upon God, and you shall be free from danger.

15. What are you to do when you are placed in this world? Give up everything to Him, resign yourself to Him, and there will be no more trouble for you. Then you will come to know that everything is done by His Will.

16. A person living in society, specially as a householder, should *make a show* of the spirit of resisting evil for purposes of self-defence, but at the same time trying to avoid paying back evil for evil.

17. As wet wood put on a furnace, loses its moisture gradually, so the moisture of worldliness dries away of itself from the man who has taken refuge in God and repeats His holy name. He who intends to think of God, after his attachment to things has ceased, will never be able to do so; for that time will never come.

18. He is born to no purpose who, having the rare privilege of being born a man, is unable to realise God in this life.

19. God is in all men, but all men are not in God, that is the reason why they suffer.

20. You cannot get butter by crying yourself hoarse, "There is butter in the milk!" If you wish to make butter, you must turn the milk into curds, and churn it well. Then alone you can get butter. So if you long to see God, practise spiritual exercises.

21. Verily, verily, I say unto you that he who wants Him finds Him. Go and verify it in your own life; try for three days and thou art sure to succeed.

22. You will see God if your love for Him is as strong as that of the attachment of the worldly-minded person for things of the world.

23. The darkness of centuries is dispersed so soon as a single light is brought into the room. The accumulated ignorance and misdoings of innumerable births vanish at one glance of the gracious eyes of God.

24. Pray to Him in any way you will. He is sure to hear you, for He hears even the footfall of an ant.

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This image shows a single, vertical strip of white paper. Near the top edge, there are two circular holes, one on each side, which appear to be from a three-ring binder. The rest of the strip is blank and oriented vertically.

